

The Greatness of God
Luke 9:28-43
Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman
February 22, 2022

28Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said. 34While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

37On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." 41Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." 42While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

43And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Soon after I began my ministry years ago, I participated in a retreat at Spruce Lake Camp in the Pocono Mountains in northeastern Pennsylvania. The retreat was for both adult and youth leaders of youth groups. It was such a spiritually stimulating event that one high school youth went to the retreat leaders to tell them he hadn't yet been baptized, and that he'd like to be baptized in the pool there that weekend.

The retreat leaders checked with his pastor, who happened to be Don Blosser, later the first pastor here at Berkey, to make sure this was okay. Don gave his consent and we went ahead with the baptism.

In the very last session that weekend opportunity was granted for people to give testimony about how they had experienced the weekend retreat. One wise woman stood up and gave us a warning: she recounted the story which was just read about Jesus having this transfiguration experience on the mountain, when he was accompanied by 3 of his disciples. She then pointed out that after the disciples came down off the mountain they experienced a defeat. They weren't able to cast out a demon from a young boy as requested by his father.

Her warning to us: we just had a mountain-top experience this weekend. We should not be surprised if we have some disappointments once we come back down off this mountain.

The very next weekend I led a retreat for a church youth group. No one told me beforehand that this was a very rowdy youth group. The weekend turned out to be a disaster, from my standpoint. At no time during the Bible talks that I gave did I have the attention of the youth. They talked all the time and acted up. I felt disheartened and downcast—the agony of defeat! The woman at the end of the previous retreat was prescient in my case: a mountain-top experience followed by experiencing my own very human limitations and defeat!

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When reading gospel stories, it is always good to put them in context: what happened before this story? What happens after it? How are they related or tied together?

Looking at the entirety of Luke 9, we see that Jesus gave power to his disciples to cast out demons and heal the sick. Then he and his disciples got into a discussion about who Jesus is. Jesus wanted to know what people were saying about him. Some said Jesus was John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets who rose again. Then Jesus asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter said, The Messiah of God. Then Jesus followed up talking about the suffering which he was about to experience and called his disciples to a life of cross-bearing discipleship.

What followed the text I just read? Jesus returned to his suffering theme. But the disciples just didn't get it. Another example of them being rather thick-headed. After that, the disciples squabbled about who was the greatest among them, a rather juvenile discussion, if you ask me.

So for the text itself: Taking three disciples with him, Jesus went up a mountain to pray. This is not an unusual experience; Jesus often went away to pray somewhere. I have heard a few of you say in recent months that you've set aside time for a personal, spiritual retreat. Though you didn't go up a mountain, you were following Jesus' example. I commend you for that. I need to think about doing something like that myself.

We don't know which mountain Jesus and his 3 disciples ascended, but its figurative meaning is more important than whatever actual mountain it was. The mountain was the place where Moses went to meet God and to enter into a covenant with God and receive the 10 commandments.

Lo and behold, Jesus was joined by Moses and Elijah on this mountain, two giant figures from the Old Testament: Moses, the one who led his people out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the commandments; and Elijah, who himself had 2 momentous mountain-top experiences: on Mt. Moriah he had the contest with the prophets of Baal; and on Mt. Horeb, where he had an encounter with God, not in the wind, nor the earthquake nor the fire but in the **“sound of sheer silence.”** I love that language, the sound of sheer silence!

The gospel writers are suggesting that Jesus was in a line with these great prophets, Moses and Elijah. And yet, Jesus was not just another prophet. He was the Messiah, the Christ. And this wasn't your typical mountain-top experience. The subject of conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah was about his impending suffering, hardly a topic for discussion during a “peak experience,” to use Maslow's terminology.

Once Moses and Elijah departed Peter wanted to memorialize the occasion by building 3 booths, one for each one of these greats. This could be a flashback to the booths the children of Israel built yearly as a reminder to them of their wanderings in the wilderness. Other translations call them tents, shelters, and even “shrines.” Clearly, a shrine was the meaning Peter intended, some kind of memorials to these three giants of the faith. But a voice out of the clouds undermined Peter’s intentions.

In a way Peter did memorialize this event eventually, as he gave an account of it in 2 Pet 1:16-18: *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.*

The climax of this story comes with the voice from heaven, saying: **“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”** This echoed Jesus’ baptism when the voice from the clouds said: **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”** It was as if the disciples weren’t getting who this Jesus was, so it had to be underscored numerous times and in numerous ways.



The lectionary gives the option of dealing only with the Transfiguration story, eliminating the story which follows. That would be an opportunity lost. What if the second part of this text is important to the meaning of the mountain experience itself? How do we deal with the agony of defeat after a peak experience (Maslow)? The disciples were asked to cast out a demon in a young boy, but they couldn’t do it, despite the fact Jesus earlier gave his disciples power to heal and cast out demons (9:1ff).

I find the Mark version of this story apt (9:28-29): After Jesus had healed this boy, the disciples asked Jesus privately why they couldn’t drive out the demon in this young boy. In Mark Jesus says: “This kind cannot be driven out with anything but prayer.”

The great Renaissance artist Raphael painted a fantastic painting of the Transfiguration. It took him 4 years (1516-20). It was his last work before he died. It is now hanging at the Vatican. What’s interesting to me about this painting is that he did both scenes simultaneously, the Transfiguration and the failed exorcism. The Transfiguration is on top, the failed exorcism on the bottom. In the bottom part there is a crowd of people. Among them is a man with an arm raised, pointing at Jesus up on the mountain. The message seems clear: in defeat, look to Jesus. When in need, look to Jesus.

I participated in Pastors' Week last week at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. I'm not sure I'd consider it a mountain-top experience, necessarily, but it was incredibly stimulating. At the end of the event I had a conversation with a pastor friend of mine who said she experience the week to be quite renewing, but she didn't look forward to going home. She is involved in conference leadership and her conference is going through some tumultuous times right now. The future looked bleak to her. It was probably too easy for me to say, but my words to her were: step back from the precipice of conflict and take time for prayer and fasting.

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I'm wondering how many of you are Tolkien fans. I must admit I've read the *Hobbit*, but not the *Lord of the Rings*. You may want to convince me that my education is not complete. Just this week I read this quote from Tolkien in a letter he wrote: "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat'—though it contains ... some samples or glimpses of final victory." I'm told that a variation of this quote appears on the lips of Galadriel in the *Lord of the Rings*. **The long defeat ... samples of final victory:** this seems an appropriate way to think of history and our faith in spite of all its trials and tribulations.

I'm sure that many of you know of the work of Dr. Paul Farmer, a highly regarded public health doctor who has given his life to ridding the world of poverty and contagious diseases. He died this past week at 62, which raises the question yet again: why do the good die young? I've been told that Farmer characterized his work with the poor as "fighting the long defeat."¹ It's not that he never had

¹ "I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don't dislike victory. . . You know, people from our background—like you, like most PIH-ers [Partners in Health], like me—we're used to being on a victory team, and actually what we're really trying to do in PIH is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

— Paul Farmer (1959-2022), *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* by Tracy Kidder

victories, but there was always something that he had to fight against—the long defeat!

With what is going on right now with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this Tolkien insight seems relevant. History is replete with suffering, war and injustice, the long defeat; yet we don't give up hope, because we do see and can actually contribute to samples or glimpses of final victory.

The Bible teacher at AMBS this past week was Tom Yoder Neufeld from Conrad Grebel College in Ontario. In his last session he asked us this question: Do we have a robust enough eschatology? Which perhaps could be asked a different way: in spite of the bleakness of much of human history, do we have hope that God's kingdom of righteousness, justice and peace will one day dawn upon us in all its fulness? Can we see the glimpses of final victory even now? That may be our only hope as we continue to fight the long defeat.
