

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 34:29, Luke 9:28-43

ASTOUNDING GREATNESS

If they weren't bound by time, what people from history would you like to hear have a conversation with one another? Scientists might want to listen to what Isaac Newton, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein would say to each other. Folks over at NIH might want to hear Louis Pasteur, Alexander Fleming, and Jonas Salk discussing the difficulties of defeating diseases. Those who are interested in human rights would likely want to listen in on a conversation between Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. What would the great liberators Cyrus the Great, Harriet Tubman, and Abraham Lincoln have to say to one another? You can imagine various groups of great musicians, writers, political leaders, or artists coming together across time to have a discussion of some matter of interest.

We have something like that going on in our reading from Luke. Jesus takes three of his closest followers up on a mountain to pray. While Jesus was praying, his face and his clothes begin to take on a heavenly glow. Peter, James, and John have a literal mountaintop experience that turns into a spiritual mountaintop experience that becomes all the more surreal when Moses and Elijah show up to have a conversation with Jesus. Moses, of course, had been the great liberator of the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt. He also was the one through whom God gave the Hebrew law and we heard in our first reading that he too reflected God's light after having received the ten commandments while up on a mountain. From there, Moses would lead his people to the edge of the Promised Land. Elijah had been a great prophet who helped deliver the Hebrew people from the power of evil rulers and directed them away from worshiping idols to returning to the one true God. The appearance of these two great figures from Israel's past gives Jesus a stamp of approval representing the Hebrew law and the prophets.

But Luke goes beyond that as the only gospel account where we get some indication about what these three were talking about up there on the mountain. The translation we read said they were speaking about Jesus' departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. That sort of sounds like they were talking about when Jesus would take his followers to another mountaintop at the end of his ministry, from which he would ascend into heaven. I love the New Revised Standard Version translation of the bible as a whole. It normally captures the best scholarly translation from the original Hebrew in the Old Testament and from the original Greek in the New Testament. But in this case, I think the NRSV has missed the mark. This is because the word that got translated as departure is the Greek word 'exodos,' which is the same form of the word that gives the second book of the bible its name. Exodus does mean departure. Literally, it means 'the way out.' In the book of Exodus we hear how God gave the Hebrew people a way out of their bondage in Egypt. Then God gave them a way out of being lost and starving in the wilderness by providing for their needs for food and giving them direction as a people. Then God gave them a way out of bondage to themselves through providing them with the law so their relationships with God and with one another would grow. Those various expressions of deliverance are what the book of Exodus is about. I have to believe that Luke wants his readers to understand that this amazing conversation is about much more than just a departure that would take place at Jerusalem. The three of them were talking about Jesus' exodus that he was about to accomplish.

There were folks who needed to be delivered from a spiritual life that lacked vitality and direction. There were people who knew the oppression that came with Caesar's reign who needed to know the liberation that comes with God's reign. There were people who did not know whether God actually loved them. They did not know how God would respond to their sinfulness. Peter, James, and John got a pretty big clue about where to look for the divine message of loving liberation that was needed. Out of a cloud that covered them on the mountain came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Then the very next day, after they had come down from the mountain, they saw Jesus respond to a man in a crowd who sought Jesus out because his son needed deliverance from what he understood to be an evil spirit. It sounds to us like the boy was having epileptic seizures, but clearly his life was dominated by something detrimental that was beyond his control. Jesus' 'exodus' work on the child began right then and there. The boy was freed from that which dominated his life in such a negative way.

Did you notice how the reading from Luke ended? Jesus heals the boy and returns him to the care of his father. Then what was the last line of the story? Do you remember? "And all were astounded at the greatness of God." All were astounded at the greatness of God. Jesus frees the boy from the spirit or illness that had such a grip on him, but the crowd is astounded at the greatness of God. Even though Jesus in a private setting is aglow with God's light and has a conversation with two of the greats from centuries in the past, he doesn't do such things out among the crowd. That mountaintop experience would be important for Peter, James, and John as future leaders of the early church to have the clear conviction that Jesus was the culmination of God's liberating work and they were to be guided by what he had said to them. But the divine glow and the extemporaneous extra-temporal talk show don't happen out among the crowds because Jesus does not want the people to be astounded at his greatness that can appear on a mountaintop. He wants them to be astounded at God's greatness that results in the freeing, the healing of one of God's beloved children.

Tonight at what is called the Super Bowl, there will be plenty of lights and special effects. Everything will be done in a big way and it will probably be a lot of fun. But it is good for us to remember that there is a difference between special effects and effects that are special. Not one child will be freed from an illness or binding influence by tonight's super game. But when Jesus carries out his exodus actions, he liberates us from all that has us shackled in one way or another. From what dominating force or attitude or brokenness or bitterness or cynicism do you need to be liberated? Even in a society that has all kinds of light shows and flashes in the pan, Jesus' effect will be special in a way that will make our hearts dazzle with grace and would leave even the greatest of the human beings of history astounded by God's greatness.