

“Sneak Preview”
Luke 9:28-36
Transfiguration of the Lord

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The late preacher Fred Craddock once played a little game with his congregation when he wanted to emphasize the importance of CONTEXT in hearing a biblical text.

The game goes like this.

I’m going to make a statement about George, and I want you to get a picture in your mind about what’s going on with George...

George will be released at 12:30pm, at which time his girlfriend will pick him up and they will go to lunch.

Now where is George?

How many people vote for the hospital?

How many vote for prison?

How many vote for George being in a church sanctuary listening to a sermon that went on a little too long....??

To understand something about George, CONTEXT makes all the difference.

Ok, silly little exercise.

But we don’t need a hypothetical example. One of the places this really becomes true is with MUSIC. Have you ever had the experience of hearing a particular piece of music, and it takes you back to another time, another place?

I remember the time in a previous congregation when I was choosing the hymns for worship one Sunday, and one of the hymns I chose was “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.”

I liked the hymn all right, it fit the text.

But our Music Director asked me not to choose it.

Don’t you like it?

That's not it, she said...it's not that I don't like it.
Then she said, "That hymn was sung at my brother's funeral...and I can't sing it."

Just a hymn, right?

No, no...

Given THAT context, it's much more than a hymn...

I raise the subject of context today because if there is any biblical text that depends almost entirely on its context, it is our story from Luke.

The transfiguration of Jesus.

A story about a mountaintop experience for three disciples and Jesus.
A story about the beautiful, wonderful, and mysterious GLORY OF GOD.

As Luke tells it:

Peter, James, and John go up on a mountain with Jesus,
and when they get to the top, Jesus starts to pray.

While he is praying, "the appearance of [Jesus'] face changed,
and his clothes became dazzling white."

And then the disciples see Elijah, who has been dead for hundreds of years, and they see Moses, who has been dead for well over a thousand years, and Luke writes, "They appeared in glory..."

Now the most common interpretation I hear of this story is that the disciples had a mountaintop experience, and the glory of God appeared, and they just wanted to live in that glory but Jesus made them go back down the mountain.

I think there's a bit more to this story than that.
Do you know what the context of this story is?

Listen to Luke 9:22, just a few verses before our text.
Jesus tells his disciples:

"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed..."

Now listen to Luke 9:44, just a few verses after our text:

Jesus says: *“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.”*

And do you remember, within the text itself, what Jesus and Elijah and Moses are talking about?

Luke writes that they *“were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”*

Jesus’ departure...in other words, his cross, his death...his suffering.

Do you see what’s going on here?

On the one hand, the disciples have a glorious and dazzling experience of God!

On the other hand, that experience is surrounded by talk about suffering...the suffering of Jesus. BEFORE the story, AFTER the story, WITHIN the story...Luke reminds us that Jesus is going to suffer.

It seems to me that Luke is telling us that the two belong TOGETHER.

The glory of God on the one hand.
The suffering of Jesus on the other hand.

What do you think?
Do you believe that God’s glory BELONGS with suffering?

Whether it’s Jesus’ suffering, or the world’s suffering or your suffering,
do these two opposite experiences...ever go together?

Many years ago, a reporter from the British Broadcasting Corporation interviewed an American television preacher. The preacher stated that Jesus was the most successful religious figure of all time.

“Just consider it—he began in obscure surroundings amid poverty and despair; and today, his followers outnumber those of any other world religion. That’s astounding!”

“But I thought he ended up on a cross,” the interviewer said.

“Oh no!” replied the preacher. “The cross was something he had to endure, as any successful person must endure hardships. But he rose from the dead. He overcame the cross and put all that behind him.”¹

Put all that suffering stuff behind him...what do you think?

I don’t know about you, but I don’t think that’s how it works.
Not for Jesus. Not for us.

I think you and I are shaped by suffering, molded by our difficult experiences in ways that are sometimes too profound for us to articulate...

Some of you may recall that between the years 2001-2005, HBO aired a critically-acclaimed show called *Six Feet Under*.

The show was about a family that ran a mortuary.
It ran for five seasons and won, among other awards, nine Emmys and three Golden Globes.

Alan Ball, the show’s creator,
was interviewed by Terri Gross of NPR
shortly after *Six Feet Under* premiered.

In that interview, Ball recounted the genesis for the show.

How does one come up with the idea for a black comedy-drama about the mortuary business? In Ball’s case, it came from a very personal and painful experience in his own life.

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Amy Miracle for this story.

When Alan Ball was 13, his 22-year-old sister was driving him to a music lesson. Their car was broadsided by another car, and his sister was killed.

It was a “before and after” event for Alan Ball, changing his life in numerous ways...but one of the things that stood out for him was how so many people didn’t want to deal with...the pain and the suffering of that event.

- For example, he learned of his sister’s death from the family physician, who happened to be driving him home to his parents and told him he would “have to be strong” for his parents...in other words, bury your pain and GET TOUGH--as if that was sound medical advice for a 13-year-old whose sister had just died.
- And when the family was at the funeral home, and his mother was weeping at the casket of her daughter...his mom got loud, too loud in the opinion of some of the funeral home workers, and Ball’s mother was escorted to another room so she could “compose herself.”

In short, the message Alan Ball received from many grownups at the time of his sister’s death was that “grief should be quiet and private, muffled and subdued, hidden behind a curtain in an adjacent room.”

“That’s a lie!” he said to Terri Gross.

“What you need to do is scream, bang on the wall, tear at your hair, because grief is a primal thing and the only way out of it is through it.”²

The only way out of it is through it...

You may think we’ve traveled some distance from our beautiful and dazzling text, but I don’t think that’s the case.

Chapter 9 of Luke’s Gospel is filled with Jesus talking about what’s going to happen next...a sneak preview, if you will, for the disciples.

² Alan Ball, interview by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, June 25, 2001, as told by Thomas Lynch in *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care*, by Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013.

On the one hand, Jesus is revealed in glory on the mountain.
On the other hand, Jesus says that he is going to suffer.

The disciples are being asked to hold these two together.

But not just those disciples.
Also these disciples.
Can we hold these two together?

Please do not misunderstand.

I hope you have not heard me say that whatever suffering you or I might go through, God intended for it to happen. That's not what I mean, when I ask whether God's glory and suffering go together.

To say that suffering, or some extraordinarily difficult and painful event in your life was planned and premediated by God...that just makes God cruel and capricious. Sometimes, things happen in life that are not a part of ANYONE'S plan, not mine, not yours, not God's...

When I ask whether suffering and God's glory go together, what I mean is this:

If we only look for God in the places where life looks GLORIOUS—
the beautiful, mountaintop experiences...
the baptism of a child,
the marriage of your daughter—
then we have not listened to Jesus.

What does God tell the disciples at the Transfiguration, from the cloud?

“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

And why might those disciples choose not to listen to Jesus?
Because of what Jesus has just told them!

You see, Jesus told them not only that he will suffer.
But also that they will suffer.

“Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

That’s Luke 9:23...that’s the context of this text as well.

In other words, it’s a difficult road ahead for the disciples,
 not because they’ve ignored Jesus,
 not because they’ve disobeyed Jesus,
 but because they’re followers of Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor once imagined what would happen if we welcomed people to church this way:

“Hello. It is so lovely to see you all here...My message will be brief and to the point. God is not in the business of protecting us from harm, and no amount of good behavior will keep us safe.

“Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If we are willing to go through it and the operation is successful, our lives will not belong to us anymore...If the operation is really successful, our good works will get us killed.”

It is a message, Taylor says, “that can empty a church out fast.”³

The glory of God revealed in Jesus.
 The cross we’re asked to carry as followers of Jesus.
 The Transfiguration says...these two go together.

Sometimes we run across people who convince us that it’s true.

Do you recall what Martin Luther King, Jr. said?

In 1960, King wrote:

³ From Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “In Weakness and Much Trembling,” in her book *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.

“I have known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been arrested five times...My home has been bombed twice...

And yet, writes King: “My personal trials have...taught me the value of unmerited suffering...unearned suffering is redemptive...The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God.”⁴

But it doesn't have to be someone like King who shows us the way.

Anyone in our church can show us the way.

I recall a couple I used to know.

They were members of the first church I served in Texas.
They had a daughter, and then they had a second daughter.

But something happened during the birth of the second daughter. A rare condition, her diaphragm would not automatically move to make her breathe.

So there was a lot of fear and worry,
and a lot of expensive equipment,
and a tracheotomy was required as well.

I remember the father coming before the Session and offering his faith reflections one evening a couple years after his second daughter was born. He said that most people approach him and his wife, and assume that the question that goes through their minds is this—

Why me?

He said the question that he and his wife ask is slightly different.
It's “Why NOT me?”

After all, they had the resources to handle this child,
to care for their child,

⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Suffering and Faith,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986.

to give their child the love that child
would need throughout her life...

Why NOT me?

Years ago, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “Official preaching has falsely represented ...Christianity, as nothing but consolation...

And consequently doubt has the advantage...

If Christianity were truthfully presented as suffering,
ever greater as one advances further in it:
doubt would [be] disarmed...”⁵

I was at a meeting a few weeks ago with a philanthropic organization here in Greenville. We were talking about the needs of Greenville—affordable housing, that kind of thing.

One of the participants invited me to share my vision for Westminster.

I mentioned something about getting out of our bubbles.
We all have bubbles, right?
Silos that we like to live in, whether it’s how we use our money,
or how we spend our time,
or what conversations we have
and choose not to have...

We all have bubbles, comfort zones in which we spend our days.
And I believe Jesus tells us today that we need to step out of those comfort zones.

So I’m looking forward to the Session retreat this coming weekend in which I’ll get to discuss with the Session and our pastoral staff what our collective vision for our future might be.

⁵ From *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*, cited in “Pastors Who Won’t Be Preachers: A Polemic Against Homiletical Accommodation to the Culture of Contentment,” by William H. Willimon, in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2006.

I'm looking forward to talking about the strengths of our church, the growth of our church, the commitment to loving our neighbor that goes back decades in this church.

And I'm also looking forward to hearing someone say:
Here is Westminster's comfort zone...
and here is Jesus...
and Jesus is calling us THIS WAY...

Of course, you do not have to wait to hear what the discussion at the Session retreat was like. You can talk about this topic with your family tonight. You talk about it after church today.

Where is your comfort zone right now?
(How many of you are sitting in pretty much the same seat you sit in every Sunday at this time?)

Where is Westminster's?

Where is God calling us to go...and what cross is God asking us to carry?

If there were ever a Presbyterian church with the strength and resources and lay leadership in place to take some chances, to be willing to fail, to step into the suffering of the surrounding community in some new and important way, Westminster is that church.

I don't know what that step will look like yet.
I do think my former parishioner put it well:

Why not you?
Why not me?

(Amen.)