

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
Luke 9: 28-36
Luke 9

I fell asleep in a movie the other night. It was the new Disney movie, "Encanto". I've seen it once already. The song, "we don't talk about Bruno" gets sung or played at random moments in our house. So when I woke up, I asked if Bruno had showed up yet. Abby rebuked me, "it's the last scene of the movie, Dad, yes! – Bruno has shown up!" Holly reliably falls asleep in movies. She usually just expects to watch the ending another time, if she deems the movie worthy to come back to. In fact, when we used to watch the show 24, which had a certain intensity, Holly would always fall asleep forty minutes in. Clockwork. And even though she knew it, she couldn't seem to resist it. I often fall asleep watching a soccer game late into the evening. When we went to see Lion King, Abby was so excited she wore herself out with all the excitement, and in the second act, she fell asleep. My dad used to fall asleep watching the evening news, as did my grandfather before him. What have you slept through? When have you fallen asleep when you intended to stay awake? When have you not been able to attend any longer?

Luke records two times, that I am aware of, when the disciples are weighed down with sleep. The first is on this mountain in Luke 9 somewhere up in the region of Galilee. While Jesus goes off a little bit on his own, and has this ecstatic moment of connecting with the prophets of the past, Luke says, "Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep." Now it's one thing to fall asleep to "Encanto" or to a soccer game. Much more to fall asleep in such a profound moment. I'm not sure why they are so sleepy. Maybe it was the hike up the mountain. But Luke is careful to say that they do not actually fall all the way asleep. They are weighed down with sleep, but do not fall asleep. He writes: "but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him."

So, unlike Holly in a movie, or Abby after a supercharged day, or me watching a soccer game, it sounds that they don't actually miss anything. I mean, I "watched" a soccer game the other night that had six goals. The game ended 4 to 2. I didn't see a single one of them. But Peter and James and John are sleepy, but they don't miss anything. So, if they don't actually fall asleep, then why bother us with the detail of their sleepiness. Seems like an odd thing to mention. Like, "Hey, we saw Moses glowing with light, and by the way, this guy had drool coming out the side of his mouth." Odd thing to say in the moment. However, sometimes odd things

that don't need to be mentioned are the biblical writers way of connecting things, of making allusions.

The next time Luke mentions the disciples' sleepiness is on another mount, the mount of Olives in chapter 22. There Luke writes: "³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'" ⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." [⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.] ⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

Events in our lives are often connected. We understand them through some framework. We are not always in control of those connections. We may experience something that triggers something of the past, and we are taken back emotionally and experientially. This may be terribly sad and difficult, or it may be happy and favorable. Almira was reflecting on Tuesday morning that the events unfolding in Ukraine took her back to the last world war. Events in our lives are often connected, and we sometimes understand some events in light of other events, or certain events take us back to other events.

The gospel writers are relying on such realities. They want to connect events for us, for us to understand certain things in light of others, because without those connections and framework, we might be a little lost. We too might be overwhelmed with grief and just go to sleep.

If we had the mount of Olives incident without anything to put it in context, without anything else to anchor or orient it, it might be too difficult. Yes, in the overwhelming reality of the disciples feeling that their messianic hopes are unraveling, and the person they have put their trust in is being carried away, and they are alone again, that is enough to want to sleep through, and it is too overwhelming. So, Luke connects these mountain stories for us, so that when we read of the dark events of holy week, when Jesus is betrayed and arrested, we can understand it in light of the clarity of the Mount of transfiguration. The betrayal and arrest and crucifixion did not come out of nowhere, but is part of a larger trajectory. Luke connects these stories as points along a narrative arc.

On the mount of transfiguration, they are weighed down with sleep, but remain awake enough to catch a glimpse of what is going on just a stone's throw away. His glory is seen. The disciples are reminded that this guy is not just the latest figure making big promises. He is not just another charismatic character riding the waves of religion's latest fad. He is transfigured, taking us back further, to another biblical story, our Old Testament reading; events being connected to other events. Jesus is shining with glory, just as Moses did when meeting with the Lord on Sinai, receiving the law, that emblem of God's love and revelation. Moses' glow is a type of sign that Moses is not passing these things on of his own wisdom, motivation, or will. He has met with the Lord. And he is bringing these words as a mediary of God's redemptive presence.

Jesus too glows, standing amidst the saints. He is not just another zealot who will come and go. He is not just another zealot who will get into trouble, who will get betrayed and arrested, and that will be the end of what we hear of him. Instead, he glows with the signs of coming from the Lord, a mediary of God's redemptive presence, a figure in God's redemptive narrative. Luke adds the line also that in the moment of transfiguration, that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking of the events to come. He writes: "They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." Again Luke is connecting events, so that we might understand the events of the Mount of Olives and of Calvary in light of this mountain, and this moment of clarity.

Now as a happy student of the Old Testament, I find the transfiguration interesting for who it is that shows up with Jesus in that shining cloud on the mountain. Let me explain. There are two theological traditions in the Old Testament. They co-exist to some degree; and they complement each other in important ways. These are often referred to as the Sinai and Zion traditions. The one points back to mount Sinai and God's revelation to Moses and covenanting with God's people out there in their wilderness travels. The other points to Mount Zion, or Jerusalem, and Zion as the center of God's creation and plans, and this tradition is rooted in God's covenant with David.

As a messianic figure in the time and place that he is in, Jesus taps into the promises and expectations tied to the Zion tradition - Jerusalem as God's holy city, Israel as a nation, and the promises made to David, that there would never cease to be a king on David's throne. And those that followed Jesus expected him to overthrow Rome, and to reclaim David's throne, to revive that promise tied to the holy city. And so, when in that Passover week, Jesus is betrayed and arrested and handed over, it seemed he was just another failed zealot, squelched by the

overwhelming power of Rome and her long-reaching fingers, unable to reclaim that throne and to fulfill those old promises and expectations.

But it is not David nor Solomon that show up in the shining cloud with Jesus. It is not these figures that gather with Jesus and who contextualize his role and ministry. It is the figures of the Sinai tradition, Moses and Elijah. These are the prophetic figures who harken back when God led through dry, lonely, and difficult times. The Sinai tradition emphasizes God as the God who is less predictable, but who shows up in times of deliverance. It emphasizes God as the one who covenants with us and delivers and walks with us. We are called to listen and to walk by faith. So as Jesus meets with Moses and Elijah and they talk about what is to come, and as Jesus is weighed down with grief in the garden, wishing the cup could pass from him, the journey is put in context by the mount of transfiguration, which connects us back even further to Moses the deliverer, and to the God who covenants with us and walks with us through desert places.

And so while Jesus will not reclaim that old throne of David in the way expected, and while Jesus will not lay claim to the holy city, and while Jesus will be betrayed and handed over like many a zealot before him and after him had been, he is a figure like Moses, who leads through the wilderness, and who brings his people from slavery to salvation, from destitution to community.

What events do you see your own life in light of? When you go through something difficult, what are the other narrative points and commonalities that give your story context and meaning and hope? What are the connections? For the disciples sleeping in the grief of the mount of Olives, Luke suggests it is the transfiguration, which harkens back further to the God who covenants with us in the desert. And therefore, what feels like defeat and obscurity is really just a chapter in that same redemptive journey.

In view of the Davidic covenant, Jesus is a bafoon. He loses. He is captured and killed. The throne is not reestablished, the enemies of the nation are not vanquished. But in the view of the God of the Sinai covenant, God is still faithful. God is still delivering. God is still rescuing and atoning. God is still leading through wilderness times. God is still faithful to that covenant relationship.

Now the connecting of events to each other, or in light of each other, is often done in retrospect. In the moment, we might be just reacting, or floundering not knowing what to make of it. On the mount of Transfiguration, Peter feels the need to respond and wants to make a shrine there on the mountain, a pilgrimage and worship site. Peter wants to stop the movement, focus on that moment. On the

mount of Olives, Peter will respond flailingly again, taking up the sword to try to stop the movement, to stop the events that have begun. And Jesus will stop *him* again.

There is a lot of symbolism and meaningful aspects infused into Lent. Lent, for example, is patterned after the forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness. However, in the church year, Transfiguration Sunday always comes the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, before the start of Lent. It is the moment of clarity before Jesus comes down the mountain, and will move eventually to Jerusalem. So, in that rhythm, I have come to see Lent as being patterned after the time between these two mountains, the Mount of transfiguration with its moment of perspective and clarity and brightness, and the mount of Olives with its darkness and heaviness, as Jesus prepares to face the darkness for us. But each are connected to the same redemptive story.

As we enter Lent, it is a season when we might ponder the redemptive love of God. For like Peter, we often get antsy and want to act, to build a shrine, or take up a sword. But the voice from the clouds on the mount of transfiguration says, much like the voice from the cloud speaks at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And on the mount of Olives, Jesus will respond like an exasperated parent, saying, "No more of this!" As if to say, get with the program. As if to suggest that if we understand the darkness and difficulty in light of other events, we might come to a different response. Not to oppose God's redemptive work, but to accept it, to embrace it, and to move with it.

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Transfiguration

(Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; 2 Pet 1:16–18)

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now 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. ³³ Just 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. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ When 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.

Jesus Prays on the Mount of Olives

(Mt 26:36–46; Mk 14:32–42; Jn 18:1)

³⁹ He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” ⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ⁴² “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” [[⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. ⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] ⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

(Mt 26:47–56; Mk 14:43–52; Jn 18:1–11)

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸ but Jesus

said to him, “Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?”⁴⁹ When those who were around him saw what was coming, they asked, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?”⁵⁰ Then one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.⁵¹ But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him.⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit?⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!”