

Luke 9:28-43 A Glimpse of the Big Picture
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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham
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[Prior to today's reading, Jesus had been speaking of his coming death and resurrection, and of the need for disciples to follow him.] 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 exodus, 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.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Between 1830 and 1869, some 400,000 European Americans crossed the continent by way of the Oregon Trail. They loaded up their wagons with the food and supplies and their most treasured possessions, and set off across prairies and rivers, deserts and mountains, toward what, for them, was the Promised Land of the West.

By the time they approached the Rocky Mountains, they and their oxen were already exhausted. Day by day, as the going got rougher, they began to unload all those items that had seemed so indispensable just months earlier when they'd left

home. Rocking chairs that had been in the family for generations, chifferobes and washstands, intricately carved bedsteads all lay strewn beside the trail. Fort Laramie, the last major stop before the Rockies, became known as Fort Sacrifice because of the heaps of family treasures that were dumped on the roadside nearby. I can't imagine the pain of parting with those objects that tied those families to their old homes and to the loved ones they'd left behind so that they could make their exodus West.

And it wasn't just furniture that lined the trail. So did graves. Snakebite and cholera, accidents and childbirth all claimed their victims. And so, the settlers had to bury their dead and leave them behind, knowing that they'd never even be able to come back and place a decent gravestone.

It's been said that people are afraid of change. That's not really true. There are a lot of changes that we welcome. People aren't afraid of change: what we're afraid of is loss. And unfortunately, just about every kind of change brings with it some kind of loss—something that we'll have to leave behind in order to move forward into the new reality. And the only thing that makes us willing to live with the loss, is if we believe that it is for a purpose that gives those losses meaning.

And so, Jesus takes Peter and James and John up to the mountaintop. His timing here is excellent, because he's just shared some distressing news with them. Right before this passage, he told them that he was going to have to suffer and die in order to be raised, and that any who wanted to be his followers would also have to take up *their* cross, make *their* sacrifice.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it,” he told them. Hardly cheery words, and the disciples might well have been wondering if they really wanted to hitch their wagons to such a gloomy gospel. But now, Jesus takes them up to the mountaintop. Here, elevated above the daily grind, they are given a glimpse of glory—a glimpse of the harmony of the Realm of God, where Jesus and Moses and Elijah--these three leaders who have suffered or will suffer so much for the people of God stand shining with light and peace.

He's told them he will have to die. What he's trying to show them is that there is something worth dying for.

At a leadership seminar I attended once, Jeff Japinga, the presenter, wrote out an equation for us. “Loss + purpose,” he wrote, “= return on sacrifice.”

Loss + purpose = return on sacrifice.

The purpose is the key. Without purpose, loss is just loss.

I think about those hundreds of thousands of people who made that dangerous and costly journey on the Oregon Trail. Not all of them continued to the end of the trail. Some of them, after they'd had to let go of so much that was precious to them, gave up and turned back. The purpose no longer outweighed the costs. The sad thing is, they still paid the costs. It's not like they got their things, or their dead loved-ones back. So for them, loss was just loss.

But for the others, the purpose remained strong enough to pull them forward, so that their losses could be given meaning by finally reaching their goal.

Up on that mountaintop, Peter and James and John saw three people for whom purpose trumped loss. Moses had managed to free a whole people from bondage, and guide them across a wilderness for forty years, kicking and screaming, until they finally reached the Jordan and looked across to the Promised Land. It was not a fun journey, and there were a number of times when Moses was ready to give up.

But when he came to that point, he went up Mt. Sinai, into God's presence—and when he came back, his face was shining with purpose.

Elijah spent much of his life speaking out against the wrongdoings of royalty and false prophets. For that, he often had to run for his life. But when he was ready to give up, he fled to Mt. Horeb where, in the quiet, he heard God's still, small voice, and found his own purpose renewed.

Now Jesus comes to this mountain to commune with those two. Later, when the moment of his greatest loss is at hand, he will go up another mountain--the Mount of Olives. "Let this cup pass from me," he'll pray, "unless it is your purpose." Once he knows that it *is* God's purpose, he will be able to greet the soldiers who come to arrest him with serenity.

"Whoever would save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake—for my purpose—will gain it."

We all have losses. There's no getting around them. Some of those losses are things we choose to let go of because we have a purpose. Other times, loss is simply something that happens, and we then have to create a purpose for that loss.

That's what people who have lost family members to cancer are doing when they start a foundation to find a cure.

That's what the Parkland students are doing in their campaign for gun control. They lost friends, they lost their youth, they lost their sense of security in the world; but they are creating a purpose out of their loss, so that their loss can have some meaning.

Sometimes purpose is something that we choose freely; sometimes purpose is something we are forced to create. Either way, it is a sense of purpose--of a *higher* purpose--that keeps us moving forward even as we mourn our losses.

I don't know what Peter and the others were thinking when they saw Jesus standing on that mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. I don't know what they were thinking when they saw him shining like the sun. I do know, though, that every now and then we all need to be lifted up like that. Lifted up above the pain and the daily drudgery of loss and sacrifice to see the big picture.

And not just to see it, but to hear it.

“This is my Son, my Chosen;” says the voice from the cloud, “listen to him!”

And that’s why we’re here. Like Moses on Mt. Sinai, like Elijah on Mt. Horeb, like Jesus on that mountain or on the Mount of Olives, we come where we can be lifted up so that we can see with God’s eyes. We come where our souls can be quieted to hear God’s voice. We come to find our purpose, and God’s purpose for us.

Only you know what your losses are. Only you know what you’ve had to leave by the side of the road. But the road doesn’t have to end there.

If you keep moving forward, the road carries you up the mountain and into the presence of Christ, and of those who have also lived lives of sacrifice. It carries you up to where there is nothing to block the rays of the sun, nothing to block your view.

There, in Christ’s shining presence, you can look out upon the vista of God’s creation, and get a glimpse of the larger realm.

It doesn’t come without loss. It never comes without loss. But the more we can use our losses for God’s greater purpose, the closer we will be to the one who meets us there, and the more our own faces and our own lives will shine like the sun.