

February 27, 2022
Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Confident Following”

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

For our 25th wedding anniversary, Susan and I took a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a beautiful and historic town in the high desert that is the home to many art galleries and museums as well as the Santa Fe Opera. Our flight from Long Island included changing planes in Baltimore, and then hours later we landed in Albuquerque, where our plane taxied on the runway for what felt like a very long time. Anxious to get out of my cramped seat and continue our journey, I looked out the side window to see a truck leading our plane; it had a large sign on the back instructed the pilot to “follow me.” As our seemingly endless tour of the taxiways of the Albuquerque airport continued, I cynically thought to myself, “Why are we following this guy; how do we know that he knows where he’s going?”

Of course, we finally arrived at our gate, and we had a wonderful vacation; but this experience reminded me of times when the person I was following was not that reliable. I have gotten directions from people whose knowledge of the route they gave me was less-than-stellar, and I found myself hopelessly lost. Others have told me to follow them in their cars, but then they drive so fast that they I quickly lose them and have no idea where I am going. One person was at least honest about their lack of knowledge of directions and being an untrustworthy guide: the bumper sticker on their car warned any would-be followers *“Don’t follow me; I’m lost!”*

Following a person requires confidence that they will be a trustworthy guide, that they have knowledge of the path upon which they are leading us and will bring us safely to our destination. Following an untrustworthy leader can have adverse consequences; it might be as simple as getting lost in a strange place or as complex and unsettling as affecting our health and safety. We need to have assurance that the one who invites us to “follow me” knows where they are going and has our best interests at heart.

Today’s Gospel lesson begins with the words *“now about eight days after these sayings”* (Luke 9:28), referring to two important sayings of Jesus. The first of these sayings is his first prediction of his death and resurrection; Jesus tells his disciples that *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the*

chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (9:22). He follows this prediction with a statement that *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (9:23). The invitation to discipleship is extended to “all,” but anyone who considers accepting this call must know what it involves. Discipleship means following Jesus in his path; to follow Jesus means to be ready to lay down one’s life just as Jesus did, a daily yielding of one’s life to the call to follow Jesus.

- “Jesus is the Son of Man who will come in glory at the end of time. Consequently, discipleship to Jesus requires a total commitment of life, taking the cross, giving one’s life in obedience to Jesus’ direction, forsaking the pursuit of wealth, and living out one’s discipleship publicly before others.” – Alan Culpepper.

Eight days after Jesus issues this invitation to discipleship along with a warning of what it means to follow him, Jesus takes three of his closest disciples – Peter, John, and James – *“and went up on the mountain to pray.”* Many important moments in Jesus’ life happen while he is at prayer; Luke reports that *“when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”* (3:21-22). While Jesus is praying, *“the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white”* (9:29). The Transfiguration of Jesus is like the experience of *theophany* in the Old Testament, appearances of the Holy God to God’s people; after being in God’s presence on Mount Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments, *“Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God”* (Exodus 34:29). This sudden change in Jesus’ appearance is followed by the appearance of two prominent persons from the Old Testament, *“Moses and Elijah, talking with him”* (9:30). They may represent the Law and the prophets, a summary of God’s Word proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures (*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”* – Matthew 5:17). Their presence may also have a Christological significance in that Jesus has demonstrated his mastery over the sea (8:22-25) and feeding the multitude in the wilderness (9:10-17), which fulfilled the pattern of Moses at the Exodus; and multiplying loaves, cleansing lepers, and raising the dead, fulfilling the prophetic works of Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-24). Luke reports that *“they appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem”* (9:31). “Departure” can also be translated “exodus,” reminding those who hear these words that as God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and enslavement to

false gods in Elijah's time, God will deliver God's people from the bondage to *"sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with [Jesus'] holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death"* (Small Catechism). Jesus' exodus will begin when *"he set his face to go to Jerusalem"* (9:51), where he will accomplish his exodus that will lead to the liberation of all people from the bondage to sin and death; *"again, events in Jesus' life are interpreted by alluding to events in the history of God's redemption of Israel"* (Culpepper). The Transfiguration also serves to confirm the last part of Jesus' passion prediction, that *"on the third day [he will] be raised."* The story of Jesus' exodus does not end with his death; it will be accomplished in his resurrection from the dead, assuring those who follow him that *"if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his"* (Romans 6:5). Jesus' exodus *"will deliver even from the power of death, not just death-dealing powers-that-be, but death itself."* (Sarah Henrich). Jesus will lead his people in an exodus away from the slavery of sin and death *"in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true."* (Small Catechism). While all of this is happening, *"Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep"* (9:32), which will happen again when Jesus invites them to join him at the Garden of Gethsemane (22:45-46). They rouse themselves in time to witness Jesus' glory, Moses and Elijah speaking with him, and their departure from Jesus. Peter suggests that they commemorate this event with a permanent structure: *"Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"* (9:33). This suggests that Peter saw the event as the fulfillment of Israel's celebration of the wilderness wandering at the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles each year (*"You shall keep a festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press ... for seven days you shall keep the festival to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate"* – Leviticus 16:13-15). Again, however, Peter has only partially grasped the significance of the event; Luke informs his readers that Peter made this statement *"not knowing what he said."* Peter wants to freeze the moment and commemorate the place; *"but faithfulness will require following Jesus to the cross, not commemorating the place of the transfiguration, which – fittingly – is not named in any of the Gospels"* (Culpepper).

As at Mount Sinai when Moses ascends the mountain to receive the Law (Exodus 19:16-20), while Peter was saying this *"a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud"* (9:34). As in the theophany

experienced by Moses, the voice of God speaks from the cloud, proclaiming the climactic affirmation of Jesus' identity in this section of the Gospel: "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*" (9:35). The pronouncement echoes two verses from the Old Testament:

- "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'" – Psalm 2:7.
- "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." – Isaiah 42:1.

The pronouncement that Jesus heard at his baptism is now heard by his disciples, along with the command that they are to "*listen to him!*" The Transfiguration confirms Jesus' identity and that the path before him was not only according to the Law and the prophets but was also the will of God for him. In his appearance to his disciples after his resurrection, Jesus reminds them that "*these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.*" (24:44). For the apostles, this experience told them that Jesus is God's Son and is to be obeyed as he instructed them on the way to Jerusalem and death; "*he is to be heard, not over against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what had been prepared in the Scriptures.*" (Fred Craddock).

As suddenly as Jesus' Transfiguration had begun, it ceases "*when the voice had spoken [and] Jesus was found alone*" (9:36). Without being instructed to do so, the disciples "*kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*" Their experience on the mountain confirmed Jesus' forecast of his death and resurrection, so its full meaning would not be apparent until after those events would come to pass. They would soon join Jesus as he sets his face toward Jerusalem, following him in his exodus that will be filled with obstacles and challenges, culminating in his suffering and death on the Cross. They follow Jesus, knowing that the path will be difficult, but following him in confidence because we know that he is truly "*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:16). They follow Jesus because they know that Jesus is the one who has the "*words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God*" (John 6:68-69). They know that discipleship means following Jesus, listening to his teachings, obeying his word, and fulfilling his mission for them so that they might be "*witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" (Acts 1:8).

- “Discipleship involves following, going on. As much as they were awed by what they had seen, they were not yet ready to be witnesses to Jesus. Only later, after further following, the grief of the cross and the joy of the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit would they be ready to speak their witness to what God had done in Jesus. Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment but by following on in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we have already experienced.”
– Culpepper.

The command to the disciple to “*listen to him*” is a key element of discipleship to Jesus for every generation of those who would be his followers. Discipleship has been defined as “*one who hears the word of God and does it*” (Raymond Brown); one needs to hear God’s Word, believing that the Word that was first spoken to God’s people in Biblical times is a Word that continues to be spoken to us. The command to listen to the word of Christ is also a command to reject any other word that would seek our allegiance or anyone or anything that would call us to follow them, since such following by necessity leads us away from the one who is the true Word that became flesh and lived among us, the true source of light and life. Being a faithful follower of Jesus means following in the example of the Virgin Mary, who “*became the first Christian disciple because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done.*” (Brown). Discipleship means following our Lord Jesus Christ, listening to his word, and walking in obedience to his teachings and commands. It is our commitment to “*walk as a child of the light, I want to follow Jesus*” (ELW Hymn 815).

The importance of listening to the Word of God that is ours in our Lord Jesus Christ can be seen in the that Paul needs to address in his letter to the Galatians. Paul had previously shared the Gospel with the people in this region of Asia Minor, but after he left other preachers came behind him preaching what he describes as “*a different gospel*” (Galatians 1:6), a message that served to draw people away from the true Gospel to follow a path that led them away from following Christ. In what has been described as “Paul’s angry letter,” the Apostle foregoes his usual thanksgiving to chastise the Galatians from failing to heed the command to “*listen to him*”:

- “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be

accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” – 1:6-10.

There have and will always be other voices and other “gospels” seeking our attention and allegiance; but from its very beginnings the Church of Jesus Christ has been rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and followed the one who is for us the only source of light, life, and salvation. We confess, believe, and teach that “*Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord*” (*Small Catechism*). When we are baptized into the Church which is the Body of Christ, we renounce any allegiance to anyone or anything that would draw us away from following our Lord in the path of discipleship: “*the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... the ways of sin that draw you from God*” (ELW Holy Baptism). We believe that Jesus Christ alone is “*the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6) and that “*there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Answering the call to disciple means that “*I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back.*”

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ’s power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

We have all had experiences with guides who proved to be untrustworthy, and directions that led us away from our desired destination. We follow Jesus because we know that he is our true Lord and Saviour, that he does indeed have the words of eternal life. We listen to him in trust and confidence that he will never lead us astray, that he is our Good Shepherd who will always lead us “*in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake*” (Psalm 23). Walking as a child of the light is a commitment to *confident following*, knowing that the one who calls us to follow him is the God who is “*our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*” (ELW Hymn 632). Amen.