

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Transfigured Priorities”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 9: 28-36

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 2, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 9: 28-36

The Transfiguration

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.

Transfigured Priorities

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

The story is told of a man—we’ll call him Joe—who had always dreamed of climbing Mount Everest. He spent years of his life preparing: buying the best gear, reading survival guides, and watching documentaries. Eventually, the day came, and Joe joined a climbing expedition. But as they ascended, he was unusually obsessed with capturing the perfect photos to document his long-awaited journey.

Every few steps, it seemed, Joe would stop to adjust his camera, change the settings, and take another picture. Their personal Sherpa—their guide—kept imploring him: “Joe, keep moving! We have to reach the summit before the weather turns.” But Joe kept waving him off.

After some hours of climbing, the group eventually reached the lookout point, but Joe wasn’t celebrating—he was frantically rummaging through his backpack. As it happened, with all the taking of his camera out and in—and out and in—it had fallen out of his pack!

What’s more, Joe spent so much of his time at the summit distressed over having missed the perfect picture that he hardly took in the mountain itself. He had been so busy trying to capture the moment that he had forgotten to experience it.

I think of that story when I read this morning's New Testament lesson, and I wonder if the disciple Peter wasn't just a little bit like Joe. There upon a mountain just to the west of the Sea of Galilee—and not too far from Nazareth—Mount Tabor, we call it—the disciples Peter, James, and John behold the grandeur of the Transfigured Christ.

We are told the appearance of Jesus' face changed and his clothes became a dazzling white. In Mark's Gospel, he says they became dazzling white, "such as no one on earth could bleach them."

Peter is understandably overwhelmed, and he offers to build three shelters—three dwellings—one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. In so many ways, Peter wanted to hold on to the moment, to capture it, to freeze it in time. And as a result, he nearly missed it.

I love how the Gospel of Luke puts it: "While [Peter] was saying this." In other words, while Peter is going on and on about what needs to happen, God essentially had to interrupt him to get a word in.

"While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them." "Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'"

Now, notice that the voice of God didn't expressly say that Peter's idea for building a dwelling place was a bad idea. In fact, if you were to visit Mount Tabor today, you would find that there's not one but two monasteries located on the top of the mountain.

No, the problem was that Peter had big plans, and he allowed his preoccupation with those plans to hinder his ability to prioritize Jesus. What he needed to do was experience the moment, to pay attention. What he needed to do was listen.

We are about to enter into the church season called Lent, and as we begin to prepare our hearts and minds for God's redemptive work at Easter, imagine how the disciple Peter must have felt upon hearing that news for the first time.

Upon hearing Jesus say that he was going to Jerusalem, and that he would undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes—and that he would be killed—Peter said to Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Alas, Peter had become so caught up in the way that he thought things should go—so focused on being out front, and taking the lead, and initiating his plan for the future—that it's no wonder Jesus spoke so forcefully to him.

We probably all remember those words, and they are shocking to us. But, oh, how gut-wrenching they must have been for Peter—a disciple—to hear Jesus say, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Now, it would be foolhardy for us to think that Peter is the only one who demonstrates just how difficult it is to walk with Jesus. Why, we can see such a person anytime we look in a mirror!

Like children on a hike, the trail of life is winding, and there are rocky paths and steep inclines. Jesus is our guide, and he tells us when to "watch our step" or when to "hold on to that branch," but we tend to say, "Thanks, God—we've got this!" Until we don't.

In life, dear friends, Jesus isn't trying to slow us down. He knows the way because he is the way, and he knows how to get us there safely. Jesus (and the Scriptures that bear unique and authoritative witness to him) is that lamp unto our feet, that light unto our path.

Last week we talked about Moses—the great patriarch and prophet—and how it was that Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. And I dare say, if there was ever an occasion for the people of God

to learn that their future was not dependent upon human agency, Moses dying at the Lord's command and being buried in an unknown location in the neighboring country of Moab made the point well enough.

But that wasn't the first time that point had been made. They had put their trust in themselves, and in their plans and visions, numerous times before.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, for example, Moses has ascended another mountain—we believe it to be Mount Sinai, which is in Egypt, just south of modern-day Israel—and while on the mountain, Moses is given the tablets of stone on which are written the Ten Commandments.

Now, at the point we enter the story this morning—here in Exodus chapter 24—the people should be sufficiently awestruck. A cloud covers the mountain, and the Bible says that “the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.”

Think about that! This was dramatic. And what did they do? Well, like the disciple Peter, they built something. But in their case, it was a lot worse than a dwelling place or a booth.

They again turned inward, and they looked to themselves for hope and assurance. What they ended up making was a Golden Calf—an idol.

Now, if the people of God in the past built a Golden Calf when the power of God was evident on a nearby mountain, what chance do we have as the church called forth today (and without such similar demonstrations of God's power)? How can we expect to rightly focus our attention on God?

In other words, how can we avoid falling into similar patterns whereby we determine for ourselves the way our feet would go?

Oh, in this world, so full of our plans and our dreams, we must always leave room for God and that voice from heaven which declared: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”

When the disciples heard that message and then looked up, Moses and Elijah—who had accompanied Jesus during the Transfiguration—were gone, and Jesus was standing alone.

That was as powerful a demonstration of Jesus' majesty as the disciples had ever seen—oh, apart from the resurrection. If they were looking for a sign of the honor and the glory that is due to our Savior, that was it.

And the miracle is that we too know the story, and so we too have heard God's voice. And for having heard it, do we not also have reason enough to pause from our priorities and to seek God's direction?

To seek that different direction which does not originate in us—the kind of direction that finds its meaning and purpose in God.

Our inclination may be to get out front, to plan, to deliver the goods, as it were—and we may be quite dutiful in all these ways. But while God truly appreciates our Christian industry, what God really wants is for us to listen.

I, for one, could not be more excited about Dr. Peter Sutton's arrival. I have been waiting for the full complement and impact of a complete pastoral team for years! And I've got plans. And Peter has plans. We all have plans. But God has plans too.

The implication being that sometimes we will have to listen before we build whatever booth we think is so absolutely critical to build—whatever good and faithful enterprise we feel called to undertake.

And why? Because our best steps are God's steps, and God walks at God's pace. God's pace is steady and sure, and it will not be rushed or hurried, no matter how far ahead of God we manage to get.

When it is the good pleasure of God to speak, God speaks. And when it is God's desire to go one way or another, God goes one way or the other. He doesn't need us to help him in that regard. In fact, what I sense that God needs more often than not is for us to just get out of the way.

John Calvin once spoke to this when he described the sum total of the Christian experience as the denial of oneself, which—taken as a principle, as a truth—is perhaps the key ingredient of prioritizing God in our life.

Today we celebrate Marin's baptism. And when we set ourselves aside, we begin to see more clearly—that before Marin is Justin and Cameron's daughter, and before she is a child of our church family—indeed, before anything else, Marin is a precious child of God.

The Bible could not be more clear in terms of what we're supposed to do: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." And so we, as individuals and as Christ's Church, we listen—and because we listen, we are blessed.

Oh, when we focus less on our journey and our plans and on the words that we might be inclined to speak—and when we focus more on God's path and God's way and what God says—the whole of our Christian life begins to change. Perhaps for the first time, it comes into proper focus, and acquaintances become relationships, meetings become ministries, and committees become communities.

We learn that baptism is not about us. We learn that worship is not about us. We learn that the Transfiguration—it is not about us. It's about God.

So many times in life we focus on the wrong things. Like the fellow Joe who climbed Mount Everest, we focus on a lost camera, our inability to memorialize a moment, and we lose the moment.

Or we become like the disciple Peter, who was so preoccupied with his moment that he failed to focus on the Messiah.

How often do we get caught up in the wrong priorities? We chase success, comfort, or recognition, thinking that these things will bring our lives meaning. But faith is not about capturing the perfect moment—it's about hearing God's voice and listening to our Savior.

Like the disciples on the mountain, we are invited to see Jesus more clearly—to let our priorities be transfigured so that we can effectively put God first.

Because in the end, it won't be about the photos we take, or the possessions we accumulate, or the distractions we encounter along the way. The only thing that will matter is if we listened, and if we truly walked with Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.