



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Epiphanies: He Knows What He's Talking About!

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Luke 9:28-36 (NRSV)

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

Recently, I was trying to parallel park our car on a busy downtown street, but as I backed the car in, I kept bumping the curb over and over again and couldn't seem to get the job done. It was like I'd forgotten how. I've always prided myself on my parallel parking skills, so I was getting more and more frustrated and also anxious as cars lined up behind me. My wife was sitting by me and began trying to coach me into the spot, and I wasn't listening to her. Finally, in exasperation, she asked, "Why won't you listen to me? You just need to turn the steering wheel in a little sooner. Try it again, and I'll tell you exactly when." So, I followed her instructions. And guess what? I niftally got it into the space close to the curb on the first try. It's a good thing I listened. She knew what she was talking about. I should have known to listen to her in the first place. She's smart and almost always right – but don't tell her I said that. Sometimes failing to listen

can lead to much more painful experiences than that. I was counseling, for instance, years ago with a heartbroken woman who was talking of a poor decision she had made about a man. Friends and family who knew of this man had cautioned her not to marry him, but she went ahead and did it anyway. She knew better, she thought. It wasn't long before he began cheating on her and treating her poorly. Now she's talking to me and says "My family and friends tried to warn me about him. But no, I wouldn't listen. Now, what a mess."

We all know the importance of being good listeners. So why do you suppose it is that it's so difficult for us as human beings? I suppose we could chalk it up to pride or ego, mistrust of someone or stubbornness or rebelliousness. When I talk about listening, by the way, I'm not just talking about hearing someone – what I have in mind is paying attention, heeding, giving credence to someone's words and then acting on them.

Our text for the day is about the importance of listening and more importantly, who to listen to above everything and everyone else because he knows what he's talking about. That's Jesus. Thus far, the question "who is Jesus?" has been central to Luke's gospel; people were continually impressed with him, his teaching and his power, and they were asking, "Who is this guy?" Earlier in this same chapter in Luke, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do the crowd say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist but others, Elijah, and still others that one of the ancient prophets has risen." Jesus asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Messiah of God." Another word for Messiah is "the Christ," the anointed one. Then Jesus went on to tell his disciples what Peter's answer implied: that he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. Then he told them what it meant to be his disciple. It meant to deny self, pick up cross, follow him, to lay down one's life for Jesus and the gospel and tell others about him unashamedly. And the disciples must have just sat there thinking, "This sounds crazy and wrong. That's not what a messiah does. What have we gotten ourselves into?"

Well, now it's eight days later since those statements were made. And Jesus takes Peter and James and John up on a mountain for a retreat to pray, and while Jesus was praying, he was transfigured, changed, before them. His face changed. His clothes became dazzling white. The glory of God was shining through him. Then we're told suddenly two men appeared and began having a conversation with Jesus, and it turns

out it was Moses and Elijah, who were famous and beloved Old Testament figures from the past, and they were speaking of his departure, which Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Now this word “departure” literally means exodus or deliverance. Jesus was about to accomplish then a rescue mission, like the Exodus Moses led when God set the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt and took them to the Promised Land. Now another exodus was about to take place, except this time it was not from captivity to a pharaoh. It would be a deliverance from captivity to sin and death for all people. Peter saw this as a very exciting thing. It shouldn't end, and being caught up in the moment, he suggested that they build three booths for Jesus and Elijah and Elisha. It was a rather strange suggestion. In fact, Luke comments Peter didn't know what he's saying, implying this was just foolishness. Perhaps Peter wanted to make this experience last longer, which was unrealistic. Or he was making these three individuals equals by giving them each a booth? I don't know. But they were not equals, of course, Jesus is unique and above them.

Whatever the reason, before Peter could go on and say anything else about it, God interrupted him first. God gave them something to see. There was this cloud that came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. Now why the fear? Because the cloud was a manifestation of the presence of God. That's the way it was in the Old Testament. God, the holy one, the creator of Heaven and Earth, the almighty, the all-powerful, all-knowing one was now with them, and I'd be afraid, too. And then he spoke to him to all of them. “This is my son, my chosen.”

So, this transfiguration story with its bright, dazzling light and an overshadowing cloud and the voice of God is an epiphany, revealing who Jesus is and what we ought to do with him. God declares in that instance, this is not another Moses or Elijah. This is my son, my chosen one, sent to save the world from sin and death. Jesus had heard these same words, basically, earlier on in his baptism. They were words of encouragement from his heavenly father, and now they were being addressed to the disciples for their encouragement and faith. This was a divine endorsement from God to these three disciples of Jesus to help them trust in Jesus all the way to the end and not desert him. When God had spoken, they found Jesus alone. “Jesus alone”: now that'll preach. Jesus alone is our savior, Lord Jesus alone can cleanse us of our sin and bring us to Heaven. Jesus alone is Lord of the Universe.

Well, Peter actually wrote of this experience years later to help solidify some other Christians' faith in Jesus, like it solidified his a little more. Listen to his words, he said.

We didn't follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we had been eyewitnesses of His Majesty. For he received honor and glory from God, the father when the voice was saying, "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I'm pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from Heaven when we were with Jesus on the mountain. So listen!

Now we have God himself telling us in this passage, "Jesus is my son sent to save." What do you suppose we're supposed to do with that truth? Well, God doesn't leave us guessing – the application for those disciples and for us, as well as found in God's simple three-word command: "Listen to him. Listen to him, he knows what he's talking about. Because he's my son, you must give serious attention to what he says. Whenever he speaks, you should know he's telling the truth." In fact, we're going to give special attention, credence to Jesus' teaching above all else, even above the law of Moses and the prophets like Elijah of the Old Testament. Not that they were any less the word of God, but Jesus' teaching supersedes and rightly interprets the Old Testament for the new age of the Kingdom of God and the new covenant. All of the Old Testament points to Jesus. Jesus will tell the disciples that after his resurrection, that he's the fulfillment. He's the authority on everything you read in the Old Testament.

Listen to him, also, about salvation matters. While it may have sounded crazy to the disciples when Jesus talked about how he had to go to Jerusalem and be killed and raised up, God was backing Jesus up on this statement when he said that in the transfiguration experience. He's saying, basically,

Jesus is telling the truth about what he has to do. Listen to him about that. Take him seriously. He must go to Jerusalem and go through all that. He told you, he's not crazy. He's my son sent to deliver you from your sins and its consequences and give you and all who believe in him eternal life. He came to bring you home to me.

As I was studying the transfiguration story, a profound thought was given me through Bible commentator Mike McKinley. I'll paraphrase this:

The transfigured Jesus on the mountain would become the disfigured Jesus on another mountain as he hung on a cross. On the mount of transfiguration, Jesus' clothes are bright, like a flash of lightning. But at the mount of crucifixion, Jesus'

clothes would be soaked in blood, divided among wicked men. On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is surrounded by Moses and Elijah in splendor. But on the mountain of crucifixion, he would hang between two criminals. On the mount of transfiguration, he's enveloped in the cloud of God's presence. But on the mount of crucifixion, he would hang on the cross in utter darkness. On the mount of transfiguration, Jesus hears a voice of his father endorsing him. But on the mount of crucifixion, Jesus would be forsaken by the father.

And God would raise him up as a confirmation of all the Jesus said about himself and the Kingdom of God. And as an affirmation of his sacrifice for sin at the cross and God would exalt him on the Mount of Olives, at Christ's ascension. And someday, someday, we will see him again in his dazzling radiance and majesty when he reappears to judge the living and the dead. That comes with that new Heaven and Earth. Listen, Jesus went through all of this for you and me – to deliver us from our sinfulness and from death; what wondrous love is this? So, we listen to him on salvation matters when he says “I'm the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the father, but through me,” we must take him at his word. No one else – he knows what he's talking about.

And God is also saying – not only to listen to him as you read your Old Testament and to listen to him about salvation matters – God is also saying here “And listen to what Jesus says about being his disciple. He knows what he's talking about when he outlines it for you.” Being his disciple really is about denying yourself instead of looking out for yourself, for number one. Being his disciple really is about seeking first the cause of the Kingdom of God instead of pursuing our own personal agendas. Being his disciple really is about picking up your cross daily and putting your reputation, your very life, on the line every day for the sake of the gospel, even if it might lead you to inconvenience, ridicule, persecution, sacrifice, and even death, which is what the cross is all about. Being a disciple really is about following him and not the other way around, and treating him as the ultimate lord – an expert in your life. Being a disciple really is about unashamedly telling others about him, no matter what, standing up for him, whatever the cost. And it really is worth it to live this kind of life because “anyone who loses his life or her life or my son's sake will save it.” That's what's being said in this transfiguration story. It may sound absurd to live one's life like that today, but God says, “Listen to Jesus and do what he says. It's the way of experience real, eternal, abundant life. He knows exactly what he's talking about.”

And listen to him on matters of life that you face. For instance, as you're reminded of your mortality in this pandemic-ridden world and you ponder the question "What happens to me when I take my final breath in this world?" Listen to him who died and rose again for you when he says, "I am the resurrection in the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall live." Bet the farm on that! Or when life is falling apart, and you're tempted to wonder whether God knows or cares about you, listen to him when he says "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. Do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows." You know, there are so many voices calling out to us, all of which seem wise and attractive. And they promise us health and wealth and happiness, but some seldom will live up to those promises and oftentimes lead many towards disappointment and ruin. But ultimately, you see, there's only one trustworthy voice that you go to first amidst the dissonance of all those voices, and we have to listen to him. Jesus, the son of God, he knows what he's talking about. So many broken hearts and lives could be avoided if we would just listen to him first because he knows what he's talking about in all matters of life and death. He knows what's best for you. He may not tell you what you want to hear, but he will tell you what you need to hear and he'll never steer you wrong. So, you and I need to be daily listeners, believing that he knows what he's talking about.

And here's the best way I found to do that: come to worship, it's there that you encounter his words in the readings and in the message for the day and the prayers and the creed and words of communion – you need to be reminded of his love and grace and wisdom. Skipping worship only will leave you ill-equipped to take on life. Worship. And of course, it's vital that you open your Bibles. To those gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and listen to him carefully each and every day of your life in your reading and reflection. Be a student of the word. Follow his instruction. He won't lead you astray, but he will lead you down right paths, God's chosen paths for human beings, and those are good paths. He will pick you up and assure you and give you hope and certainty, even in the most uncertain times. This Jesus has so much to say to us that we need to hear in order to really live as God intended. There's no more refreshing voice or knowledgeable voice in all the universe than his. He's the son of God, and that voice is a voice that loves us. So why not commit ourselves to go to him daily and listen to what he has to say? He knows what he's talking about. Here's a short prayer for us to use each time we open up a Bible or enter a worship service: "Speak, oh Lord. My Bible and my heart and mind are open. Your servant is listening." Amen.