

28 About eight days after Jesus said these things, he took Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. 29 As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes flashed white like lightning. 30 Two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him. 31 They were clothed with heavenly splendor and spoke about Jesus' departure, which he would achieve in Jerusalem. 32 Peter and those with him were almost overcome by sleep, but they managed to stay awake and saw his glory as well as the two men with him.

33 As the two men were about to leave Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it's good that we're here. We should construct three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—but he didn't know what he was saying. 34 Peter was still speaking when a cloud overshadowed them. As they entered the cloud, they were overcome with awe. 35 Then a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!" 36 Even as the voice spoke, Jesus was found alone. They were speechless and at the time told no one what they had seen.

37 The next day, when Jesus, Peter, John, and James had come down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus. 38 A man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. 39 Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. 40 I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn't." 41 Jesus answered, "You faithless and crooked generation, how long will I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." 42 While he was coming, the demon threw him down and shook him violently. Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father. 43 Everyone was overwhelmed by God's greatness. While everyone was marveling at everything he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, 44 "Take these words to heart: the Human One is about to be delivered into human hands." 45 They didn't understand this statement. Its meaning was hidden from them so they couldn't grasp it. And they were afraid to ask him about it -**Common English Bible**

Several years ago I stumbled upon an instagram reel featuring Glennon Doyle and her wife Abby Womack. Abby was trying to read something and was frustrated because she landed on a word she could not understand and could not easily figure out. She shared that it is moments like this that make her hate reading and tend to make her give up and stop trying. They make her feel dumb and she doesn't like to feel this way. Her wife, Glennon, a best-selling author and former reading teacher, was encouraging her to relax at moments like this, look for context clues, and just keep reading... to make up a meaning if she needs meaning, but just keep reading. This strategy is not satisfying to Abby. She needs to know that she has it right. I wished Glennon had told her she can always look up the meaning of troubling words if that

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would help her to keep going— it's so easy now to do this. But, in any case, I appreciated Abby's willingness to share her struggle publicly and Glennon's encouragement of her.

I appreciated Abby's willingness because I suspect a lot of people let a struggle to understand shut down their engagement. I have witnessed this a lot over the years as folks have struggled to stay engaged when they can't readily understand. And so much about the life of faith is difficult to understand, so much about life in this world is difficult to understand. Yet we're called to live our faith, to follow Jesus... to stay engaged.

One thing on display in our Gospel reading today is the misunderstanding of disciples. I'll come back to that, but first some context for what we read today. Earlier in chapter 9 Jesus sends out the 12 apostles, for the first time, to proclaim the Gospel and heal the sick. He tells them to take nothing for their journey— no walking stick, no bag, no bread, no money, not even an extra shirt. He tells them to depend on the hospitality of residents of the towns they enter and to keep on moving wherever they are not welcome. And apparently they followed his instructions. They got practice in extending his ministry while he was still on earth. When they return from their adventures, Jesus tries to get away with them, but a crowd follows and Jesus ends up spending a whole day teaching and healing. When the day ends the disciples urge Jesus to send the crowd away to feed themselves and rest. Jesus orders the disciples to feed the crowd. They are flabbergasted. They can't understand. They have five loaves and two fish and there are over 5,000 people. Jesus has them organize the crowd and then blesses the bread and fish, and somehow everyone is fed and there are 12 baskets of leftovers. Next we hear of Jesus asking the disciples who people say that he is... and a variety of misunderstandings are expressed. Then Jesus asks them "But who do YOU say that I am?" And Peter sees clearly that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ sent from God. Immediately after this moment of clear understanding Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he will suffer many things and be rejected by the religious authorities in Jerusalem— that he will be killed and that he will be raised three days later. Luke doesn't tell us this, but other Gospels suggest that Peter rejects this teaching. Such suffering is incompatible with

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expectations for God's Messiah. Even though Luke doesn't tell us, we can imagine that all the disciples struggled to understand and accept what he was telling them. What we see throughout this chapter and indeed throughout this and all the Gospels, is disciples having flashes of insight and power, but spending much time confused and misunderstanding.

So on the mountain climb that Jesus takes with Peter, James and John they are likely carrying with them with the heavy teaching Jesus has laid on them. Either they don't believe him or they are terrified that what he has said will happen or they are overwhelmed. They haven't been following him all that long and now... it all might end? Badly? Luke tells us that Jesus is climbing the mountain in order to pray. We saw earlier in the Gospel how Jesus would withdraw to pray when he was struggling with something— last time we saw it conflict was rising with religious authorities. It is possible that though Jesus understood clearly what was coming, he was wrestling with it. Was he ready? And a bigger question, were his apostles and disciples ready? Would they stick with him and his way when things got really bad? Luke tells us that when Moses and Elijah appeared they were talking with Jesus about his upcoming departure from Jerusalem. Both Moses and Elijah had already departed and they had very different departures. Moses dies in disappointment, never making it to the promised land... and dies not at all confident that the people of Israel understand and will be faithful. Think about what Moses put up with with his people in the wilderness. Moses' departure bears witness to the struggle of faithful leadership and the cold hard reality of death. Elijah's departure, in contrast, involved being swept up into heaven in a whirlwind on a chariot. He got to avoid death all together. When I first read that they were talking about Jesus' upcoming departure, I wondered "his death or his ascension?" Both are "achieved" in Jerusalem. But the more I thought about it I realized the answer is "Yes. Both." This might be part of the significance of the appearance of these two figures. They represent both of the departures he will make, in suffering and in glory. They can understand him and what he is about to experience better than anyone on earth.

Peter certainly doesn't understand. He is swept away by the transformation he witnesses, by the presence of these religious heroes, by the presence of God

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surrounding them in a cloud. To think, he almost fell asleep and missed it. But he didn't. He saw it. He saw Jesus' face shining and his clothes flashing white like lightning. And it seems like this must be the pinnacle of the story, Jesus was wrong after all. He can be enshrined on this mountaintop and none of the forecasted suffering will ever have to take place. Peter babbles about erecting shrines for all three of them so they can stay in conversation forever. Luke tells us Peter didn't know what he was saying. Of course, spiritual beings cannot be contained in any earthly location. Moses and Elijah can't stick around. And Jesus has got to go to Jerusalem. But we can understand Peter's impulse. It is easy to understand God's presence and activity on the mountaintop of glory; it is tempting to want to stay there forever. But Jesus is trying to prepare him and all his followers to perceive God's presence and activity in the valleys... in the failures, the struggles, the misunderstandings, and the cross. When God speaks on the mountain, he has a message much like that delivered at the Baptism— "this is my son, my chosen one..." but now the message is for the apostles... "Listen to him." They have been hearing but not listening; they are struggling to understand. God urges closer attention.

When they come down from the mountain, they are thrust back into demanding ministry immediately. A man screams out from a thick crowd, begging for Jesus to help his son. He had asked the disciples to cast out the spirit afflicting his son and they could not do it. Jesus expresses profound frustration at their limitation. I think this frustration comes from the fact that he is actively preparing for departure and still the disciples are clearly not ready... they are failing and misunderstanding... Jesus is able to heal the man's son and that is glorious, but then once again he tells his disciples that he will be handed over in Jerusalem... and they don't understand. And they're afraid to ask any questions.

I heard two scholars say that part of what Jesus might be concerned about is that if his disciples can only recognize him in the glorious moments, they won't be able to recognize him at the apparent end. I quote, "The reality of God, the story about Jesus is not simply in the glorious things, but is also in the misunderstandings and the failures. Just because you're seeing misunderstandings and failures, does not mean that you're not seeing God's glory being worked out in your presence. It's easy to see

it on top of the mountain. It's easy to see it in the healing. It's really hard to see it in the disciples' failure to carry through; it's really hard to see it in Jesus' description of his suffering and death at the hands of the imperial power. If followers of this Gospel are only able to see God at work in glorious moments, this is not sufficient to the life of faith. You have got to be able to recognize that God is at work among us even when we fall short, we don't understand, we can't hear, we can't talk about it, we can't take it on board, we can't do it, Jesus is crucified... in those things, that's when we most need to be aware that God is at work in the world."

Right now friends, as we navigate profound national and global instability, after a five year period (or really is it more like a nine years?) of chaos and distress every day there's news that defies comprehension— turning the ruins of Gaza into a money making opportunity, further displacing its traumatized residents, hard working public servants losing their jobs, non-profits shutting down, planes crashing while air safety organizations are increasingly underfunded, international aid workers fired and left to find their own way home leaving behind situations of desperate need in which they had been intervening, medicaid imperiled, a rise of dysentery in our very own city due to a lack of hygiene facilities for unhoused neighbors... it might feel especially hard to understand where and how God is present in the midst of all this... but our faith teaches us that God is indeed at work, as much in valleys as on mountains, as much in apparent failure as in apparent success, as much in suffering as in glory... and we all need to continue to nurture and cultivate the stamina to continue to believe that "God's work is actually unfolding in the world and to participate in that unfolding even though right now it looks like misunderstanding and failure."

We might, like Abby, want to give up, to check out, to resign ourselves to never understanding. But I hope we'll take the Lenten season ahead as a time to let our faith seek understanding... To seek a deeper understanding of our own hearts and lives and a deeper appreciation of what it means to follow Jesus. I hope we will LISTEN to Jesus, even when we struggle to understand, and that listening will sustain and transform us. And I pray that some of that mountaintop light that foreshadows resurrection glory will shine in us and on us and through us and help us to see.

Source in addition to scripture that influenced and was cited in this sermon:
Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson Jr. "Episode 224: The Mount of Transfiguration
(Luke 9:28-45)" on the Bible Worm Podcast. [https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/
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