

Who Is Christ for Us? The Son of God
A Sermon on Luke 9:28-36
Transfiguration Sunday
March 3, 2019

Introduction

As Disciples we like to say we have no creed but Christ, but we do have a creed. When we are baptized and when we join a congregation, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Last month we talked about what Christ means for us. Christ is a prophet, a king and a priest, three offices that are anointed in the Old Testament. Today we will talk about Christ as the Son of God.

We have heard that said so many times, we just accept it as fact. We don't think about what it means. Today we will.

First Move: Christ in Glory

My earliest memory of Jesus is a painting. It hung in my grandmother's living room. It also hung in the Disciples churches I grew up in. The painting is called *The Head of Christ*. It was painted by Walter Sallman in 1940. It has sold more than 500 million copies, more than any other Christian painting.

We see only the head and shoulders of Jesus. He is a handsome young man, with long hair and a beard. He is wearing a white robe. He looks as if he is praying with his eyes open. He is looking up. There is a soft white light shining on him. There is a white halo of light behind his head.

This is a picture of Jesus with the glory of God shining on him. In my mind, it is something like what Peter, John and James see on the mountain.

Jesus takes Peter, John and James with him to pray. Luke emphasizes prayer more than the other Gospels. Significant events in Jesus' ministry in Luke happen after he has been praying.

Luke says, "and it happened in his praying." This is when we are closest to God, when we are praying. That is when we are more focused on God than at any other time in our lives. Especially when we are just listening in prayer instead of asking for stuff. "God, here I am, I am opening myself up to you. Let your will be done. What is your will?" Then we are silent and listen.

Something happens to Jesus when he is listening for God. Luke does not use the word μεταμορφόω as Mark and Matthew do. This Greek word is transliterated

into English as *metamorphosis*. The Vulgate translates it into Latin as *transfigurare*. That is how we know the story as The Transfiguration. Luke says instead that the appearance of Jesus face is different and his clothes are a dazzling white, dazzling like a flash of lightning in the sky. Luke is drawing on the story in Exodus of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai, and his face shines because he had been talking with God. Moses' face is a reflection of the glory of God. Moses put a veil on his face because it was too bright for people to look at. St. John of Damascus says that the brilliance of Jesus' face came from within. Jesus is more than Moses.

Then something even more dramatic happens. Behold, Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus. Israel's two greatest prophets have come down from heaven to speak with Jesus. Luke says that Moses and Elijah also appeared in glory and that they were talking to Jesus about his exodus, which can also be translated as departure. That could mean his departure for Jerusalem—Jesus is just beginning his journey on the road to Jerusalem. It could also mean his death.

This is too much for Peter, John and James to take. They are weighed down with sleep, just as they will be weighed down with sleep in Gethsemane when Jesus asks them to come pray with him. Their sleep is a defense mechanism. God is too intense for us. We want a mediator, like Moses or Jesus or a priest, to go to God for us. God is too pure, too good, too holy. God makes us feel insignificant, unworthy.

When the disciples awaken from their sleep, they see the glory of Jesus and the two men standing with him. The root meaning of the Greek word for glory is bright and shining. To look at the glory of Jesus is like looking into the sun. We live in a world of shadows. Jesus is pure light.

Peter disrupts the beauty of the moment by speaking. Peter is impetuous. He says the first thing that pops into his mind. "Master, it is good for us to be here, let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Peter thinks the Day of Salvation has come. He believes that on that day God would pitch a tent and live with the people again, just as in Moses' day.

Peter is drawn to the glory. That is a natural reaction. He wants to preserve the glory of the moment. He has blocked out what Jesus has been telling him about the suffering that comes first.

While he is saying these things, it happened: a cloud overshadowed them. The cloud symbolizes the presence of God. Clouds were considered a blessing. Ancient Israel was a desert land. Clouds were symbols of life and hope. God took the form of a cloud when God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. A cloud overshadowed Mount Sinai for 40 days while God spoke to Moses on the top of the mountain.

The disciples are afraid as they enter into the cloud. Fear is the most common response to God in the Old Testament. They thought God's power was like electricity. It was dangerous and could kill you if you came too close. God was holy and people were profane. Mixing the holy and the profane could cause an explosion.

Second Move: The Voice from the Cloud

God speaks twice in the Gospel of Luke—at the baptism of Jesus and at the Transfiguration. At the baptism, a voice comes down from heaven and speaks to Jesus, “You are the my son, the beloved [one], in you I take delight.”

This time the voice speaks from the cloud to the disciples. “This is my son, the one who has been chosen. Listen to him.”

Luke has been overwhelming us with visual images of God: a mountain, a changed face, brilliant whiteness and a cloud overshadowing the mountain. All these visual images and the climax of the story is a voice, “Listen to him.”

The Transfiguration comes immediately after Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah of God.” But Peter didn't understand what kind of a Messiah Jesus was. The disciples may have been expecting the Messiah to be a great warrior like David who would reconquer the land and establish a new kingdom of Israel. Jesus tells the disciples that it is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer much, to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, the religious leaders of ancient Israel, to be killed and on the third day to be raised. This is the first Passion Prediction. Jesus tells the disciples that the way to the kingdom is to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. The disciples are bewildered.

Even more difficult teaching will come after the Transfiguration. On the road to Jerusalem in Luke, Jesus tells the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. These parables challenge our understanding of God as distant. No, God is near. God is all around. The parables also challenge the rich to stand in solidarity with the poor.

Luke is using every tool in his toolbox to make Jesus' difficult teaching sacred. Peter thinks the day of glory has already arrived.

Peter is on a spiritual journey, much like our own. He has the insight to make the first Christian confession. “You are the Christ.” That is the same confession that we make as Disciples of Christ. But Peter doesn't fully understand what that means. Peter has seen Jesus with Moses and Elijah but he will still fall asleep at Gethsemane. He will still deny Jesus three times. He will still abandon Jesus on the cross. But in Acts, Peter will be filled with the courage of the Holy Spirit and give the first

Christian sermon at Pentecost. The Spirit will give him the power to raise a girl from the dead, just as Jesus did.

Third Move: The Uniqueness of Christ

The voice tells the disciples, “This is my son.” This is the one who is most like me. Jesus is like us, but he is different from us. We all are children of God, but Jesus is more like God than any of us. That is the confession we make as Christians. We know God best through Jesus.

We all have commitment problems. We want to be committed to God, but we can’t help being more committed to our own desires. We can’t go out on our journey with no staff, no bag, no money, no bread, no extra clothes. We can’t be totally dependent on the hospitality of strangers. We consider that irresponsible. We can’t trust totally in God, be totally dependent on God. We want to be self-sufficient.

I don’t mean to be laying a guilt trip on anybody. We can’t do it. Jesus could.

We would fight to defend ourselves. Jesus wouldn’t.

We can’t help but hate some people. Jesus didn’t.

We get the impression from some scholars that Jesus is just a teacher and a spiritual guide. That is the problem with low Christology. It reduces Jesus to something more manageable. Someone who doesn’t have any glory. Someone we can look at without covering our eyes.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus awakens us to God’s presence all around us. Jesus teaches us how to pray. Jesus turns us toward the kingdom.

Last week Terri Hord Owens, the General Minister and President of the Disciples of Christ in the United States and Canada, spoke at Leadership Training School. She talked about Disciples’ commitment to justice and anti-racism, pro-reconciliation. She emphasized the need to ground ourselves spiritually when we do justice work. Otherwise we are just partisan activists.

Grounding ourselves spiritually means prayer. Especially when we are making big decisions, we need to pray. We need to open ourselves to where the Spirit is leading us.

Grounding ourselves spiritually means Bible study. The Bible shows us how our ancestors in faith understood how God was at work in their lives. Many of their ideas seem strange to us today. They were living in a different culture in a different age. Instead of rejecting what seems strange to us, we need to hold it in contrast with our own theology. Reading the Bible stretches us. It deepens our theology.

Grounding ourselves spiritually means suffering. Suffering is not a good thing in and of itself. Everyone wants to avoid pain. Suffering is a natural consequence of

doing God's will instead of satisfying our own desires. "Yet not what I want, but what you want." We will give up things that we want to do in order to do things that we are being called to do.

Grounding ourselves spiritually is essential to our transformation process as a church. You have met in house groups and learned about the changing religious landscape. Different generations and demographic groups have different expectations for church. You have suspended judgment so you could take it all in.

Now is the time for us to do some problem solving. We need to decide which groups we will focus on reaching. We need to decide on a mission for our church that meets the needs of our community and that everyone will participate in and support.

As I read the profiles of the different Mosaic groups in our community, many of them seem self-absorbed. They are focused on their careers, their families and their leisure activities. This is natural. They are pursuing their own desires. They have not progressed very far on their spiritual journeys. Yet they are looking for spiritual guides. They know that there is more to life than their own little world.

We need to bring our own spiritual practices in dialogue with that. We too have struggled with selfish desires. Think back on when you were 25, 30, and 35. What was missing in your life? What could you say now to your 30-year-old self? What do you know about career and family that you didn't know then? How has Christ made a difference in your life?

Conclusion

Christ is a prophet, a king and a priest. There were many prophets, kings and priest before him. What makes Christ unique is that he is the Son of God.

Historical Jesus scholars point out that followers of Christ called Jesus the son of God to contrast him with Caesar. Romans called the Caesars sons of God. Scholars argue that Christians are saying that Jesus is an important person by calling him a son of God.

Jesus is more than that. Christian tradition early on confessed that Jesus was without sin. He was able to empty himself of his own desires and follow God's will instead of his own. He prayed to get a strong sense of God's will. Jesus was spiritually in tune with God like no one else.

The same voice from the cloud that spoke to Peter on the mountain speaks to us. "This is my son, the one who has been chosen. Listen to him."