

## **Reflection**

Psalm 99

Luke 9:28-36

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### *Psalm 99*

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them. O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

### *Luke 9:28-36*

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.

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“Who do the crowds say that I am?” Jesus had asked his disciples shortly after feeding more than 5000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Some reported to Jesus that many of the crowd thought that he was John the Baptist, while others felt that he was Elijah, or another ancient prophet risen again. Then Jesus’ question became more direct, more personal as he asked the disciples who did they think he was. Peter responded with words that may have been on his mind and heart for awhile as he had traveled and ministered with Jesus as he taught and prayed about God’s coming kingdom, as he compassionately healed many of their demons, illnesses and physical limits, as he performed miracles, “you are the Messiah.”

The Messiah, the long awaited One who would overturn Roman rule and occupation, who would redeem and restore the people, and would rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Peter was the one to say aloud that Jesus was the Messiah, but certainly not the only disciple to think so. This is a time to be celebrated, this is good news.

Yet before the celebration even begins it is over, devastatingly over, as Jesus defines what it truly means that he is the Messiah. He is not what has been expected as he shatters those expectations. He is not a warrior but instead will know rejection, will suffer greatly, will be killed, and then somehow rise again in three days. Before this news even begins to sink in, Jesus' teaching goes further, goes deeper. Those who want to follow him must deny themselves and take up their own cross, must lose their lives in order to save them. These words are direct and forthright, they are not offered as a parable.

Now, eight days after this incredible and painful revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, there is finally a time of quiet away from the crowds, some time away for respite, reflection and prayer, as Jesus, Peter, James and John hike up a mountain. Each has time alone with their thoughts, some time to ponder what Jesus says lies just ahead. Step by step up the mountain, watching for jutting rocks, quickly moving small animals, feeling the sun and the heat of the day on them, and stopping every now and then to catch their breath and appreciate the view as they climb higher and higher, this is the time away that the disciples needed to think, to reflect, to accept and to prepare.

When they reached the summit, Jesus began to pray. Suddenly Jesus was transfigured, transformed, as his appearance changed, his clothes became dazzling white, and Moses and Elijah stood talking with him. The Law, the Prophets and the Messiah were speaking about what would soon happen in Jerusalem, the very same disturbing, alarming, things that Peter, James and John had heard Jesus tell them.

Peter, always the quickest to speak and react, offered to build dwellings for each of them as he sought a way to protect Jesus from the suffering and death waiting for him. With a generous heart and caring spirit, Peter did not yet know that without a cross, there could be no crown. Peter wanted to offer to his beloved teacher Jesus the same extravagant compassion that he had seen Jesus offer over and over to the crowds of strangers, but that was not to be. Peter was comfortable, secure, content and proud of the glorified Jesus, the exalted Messiah, but could not accept a suffering Jesus.

Are we any different? Aren't we far more comfortable with the glorified Jesus than the suffering Jesus? In our visions of Jesus don't we see Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, The Alpha and Omega, The Great I Am, the Bread of Life, the Lover of Justice, much more readily than the Suffering Servant, or Sacrifice? We look forward to the anticipation of Advent and then joyfully celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the gift-bearing Magi as they followed a star, and Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan to begin his ministry and his ability to outsmart the grandest of temptations. We find comfort and reassurance in the gospel stories of young Jesus teaching the elders in the temple, of water turning to wine as a sign of divine graciousness and abundance, of Jesus gently teaching us just how to pray, of the hope graciously poured out in the Beatitudes, of the incredible images as Jesus walks on water, stills a storm and raises a good friend from the dead, and at the welcoming feast and remembrance of Jesus as we break bread and drink of the cup of blessing. We find solace and encouragement in the gospel stories of withered hands and paralyzed bodies being restored, of sight, speech and hearing returned to those had been excluded because of their physical limits, of demons cast into swine and over a cliff, of thousands of people fed not only by the words of Jesus' teaching but by his miraculous ability to do so with a bit of bread and fish.

Wouldn't we rather build a dwelling for Jesus than move into Lent, and on to Holy Week?

The poet Ann Weems<sup>i</sup> says what we feel:

The journey to Bethlehem  
was much more to my liking.  
I am content kneeling here,  
where there's an aura of angels  
and the ever-present procession  
of shepherds and kings who've come to kneel to the Newborn  
in whom we are newborn.

I want to linger here in Bethlehem  
in joy and celebration,  
knowing that once I set my feet  
toward Jerusalem  
the Child will grow,  
and I will be asked to follow.

Peter, James and John came down the mountain and went to Jerusalem. We who want to linger in Bethlehem must instead journey to Jerusalem.

Peter, James and John had their time for reflection on their mountain journey with Jesus and became witnesses to the Transfiguration. When we reflect on Jesus' Transfiguration, his glory, as a last stop before Lent, we too become acutely aware of Jesus' suffering, his death.

Atop a mountain Jesus the Messiah shone in the light of glory. On a cross on Golgotha, Jesus the Messiah will suffer and be shamed.

Here on the mountain Jesus' clothes are dazzling white. There his clothes will be stripped away, and lots will be cast to divide his clothing.

Here on the mountain Jesus is honored, and there he will be mocked.

Here Jesus is with Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, there he will be crucified with two criminals.

Here bright, radiant clouds surround them, there thick darkness will cover the land.

Here God says, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" There a centurion will say, "Truly, this man was God's Son."

"Who do the crowds say that I am?" Jesus had asked his disciples. Then Jesus' question became more direct, more personal as he asked the disciples who did they think he was.

Who do you say that Jesus is? Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> – from *Kneeling in Jerusalem*, by Ann Weems. ©1992 Westminster/John Knox Press