**My Son, My Only Child**

**A meditation on Exodus 34: 29 – 35 and 9: 28 – 43a**

**Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church March 3, 2019**

Two sons. Two beloved, only sons. Not one, but two. One named (Jesus), the other unnamed. One grown, his purpose clear. The other young, just starting out in this world. One radiant and glowing with power, the other ashen and pale from sickness. Two sons. Two very distinct sons whose paths will intersect, and that encounter will acknowledge the dichotomy of our world: the comfort and the sorrow, the now and the not yet,

This is our last Sunday before we step into the season of preparation we call Lent. Before joining Jesus on the path to Jerusalem, we are invited to climb a mountain. There are mysterious things to be seen there, and equally mysterious things to encounter upon returning. On this Sunday, we watch Jesus climb a mountain, accompanied by other sons: Peter, James and John. It is a mountain of preparation, a brief renewal as he braces himself for his own exodus from this world.

At the beginning of this ninth chapter of Luke, Jesus gathers his disciples and gives them “all power and authority over all demons and to heal illnesses. (Luke 9: 1.) As he sends them off to do God’s work, he doesn’t pack them a lunch, or remind them to take an extra change of clothes. They don’t get to take spending money for snacks. “Take nothing,” he says. “You are equipped with faith; you are equipped with the power of God’s presence.” They spread out, two by two, into the community. They go out to listen for the voices of those in need of healing and hope. The twelve go out into the community and they do just what their teacher told them to do: show God’s love to the world. When they return they share their stories with one another, with their teacher. Then, together, they journey on, companions for Jesus as he teaches, feeds, and heals. They, who did nothing to deserve this place at Jesus’ side, are first hand witnesses to the ways that God is at work transforming the world.

The disciples are having one of those rare (brief!) seasons when everything is clicking. They did a good job on their mission trip. No mission trip t-shirts, but everybody got gold stars…even Peter! The good news about Jesus is spreading and they are right there by his side. They are part of an exciting movement! But then Jesus has to go and spoil everything by telling them he will be leaving them. And not just leaving, but dying. As if that were not stressful enough, he gives them a question – for discussion – in small groups. He gives them a question that disturbed them then, and disturbs us still:

*What advantage do you have if you gain the whole world for yourself but lose your life?*

*What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself?*

He says this to a group of raggedy disciples who have relinquished the little they own to walk with Jesus. So why say this? Perhaps because Jesus knows that there are those who take great pride in possessions and others who take great pride in power. Some of us seek to “gain the world” through tangibles, but others through “intangibles.” Equally dangerous, equally unfulfilling. Perhaps he knows how perilous it is for them to hold on to the - fame? infamy? - of claiming to be his disciples.

He leaves nine of them behind to ponder that question. The other three, Peter, James and John, are invited to climb a mountain with him. There, on that mountain, mysterious things take place. Moses and Elijah appear and visit with Jesus. Moses and Elijah, who understand the heartbreak and beauty of loving God’s people, talk with Jesus about his future. Moses and Elijah both know how dangerous this world can be for those who walk in God’s ways. Both know how risky this world can be for those who challenge oppressive and abusive powers. To be Moses or Elijah? That’s one thing…to be the Son of God…well..With this awareness, this understanding, they speak to Jesus about his own exodus from this world.

Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Ched Myers (p. 116):

*Only Luke reports what Moses, Elijah and Jesus discussed: his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem (v. 31). The Greek noun ten exodon (exodus) clearly connects Jesus’ fate with the great liberation of Israel from empire. Luke is actually reversing the logic of the old story: whereas Moses led the people away from Pharaoh’s slavery system, Jesus is heading into the heart of darkness-the capital city of Roman-occupied Palestine-to speak truth to the powers and to face the consequences. How Jesus’ way of the cross-the dreaded symbol of empire’s defeat of dissidents- represents liberation- is of course the central challenge of Second Testament faith. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus is consulting with Moses and Elijah concerning this counterintuitive and politically unorthodox strategy…*

Jesus does have a strategy – it’s a plan that leads to death, but doesn’t stop there. It will lead to life beyond death, and a renewal of hope which the world has never known.

After these words of truth have been shared among God’s servants, **God** speaks: “This is my son, my chosen one; listen to him.” A word of encouragement, of hope, of strength. A reminder to the perplexed disciples that they can trust the path which Jesus must walk. The hike down must have been interesting…was it silent, each lost in their own thoughts? Was it chaotic, as Peter, James and John all jostled to walk beside Jesus, in hopes he would help them to understand the bizarre encounter they had just witnessed.

Though things were mysterious and holy and time was a confusing concept up on the mountain, in the valley, time slogged on, and everyday life continued as before, with its problems and grief. The nine who were left behind have tried, and failed to help a desperate father. For down below, another parent has been speaking about a son. While the voice on the mountain was rejoicing, the voice in the valley was crying for help. While on the mountain, a son was preparing for suffering yet to come; in the valley a son was already suffering, with no promise of a better day.

A young boy, an only son, suffering from seizures is brought to Jesus. Though he has compassion on the child, Jesus responds with frustration over the lack of faith that confronts him. We do not know to whom he is speaking as he spits out his criticism to the “faithless generation.” What we do know is that he heals the child, restoring him to his family. In doing so, Jesus not only heals their broken hearts, but assures their economic stability. A poor family cannot afford to lose an “only son.”

Why couldn’t the disciples heal the boy? They had healed people before – only 36 verses ago! All nine of them working together couldn’t accomplish what they earlier had done working with just one partner. Theologian Fred Craddock (Interpretation, p. 136) asks:

*Have they grown arrogant with success and lost their relationship to the source of power? Had they failed to sustain that power through prayer? Has Jesus’ announcement of suffering and death robbed them of faith and firm commitment? Or have they been granted failure in order to see that just because Jesus is moving toward death does not mean that his power and authority are diminished? Jesus is not and will not be a victim; he chooses in the power and will of God to go to Jerusalem…the greatness of God is still evident in him.*

“Have they been *granted failure*?” We don’t often look at failure that way. Failure is an embarrassment (and the disciples probably were a little embarrassed!). Failure is something we feel shame over. (Those disciples were probably 15 shades of red!) Perhaps, like the disciples, we might need to open ourselves to the possibility that we are sometimes “granted failure.” Failure with our interactions and relationships, failure with our tasks, failure with our ideas. Maybe failure can be that crack of which Leonard Cohen wrote. Perhaps failure can be that crack “through which the light gets in.”

The disciples’ failure allowed Jesus to step in and demonstrate, once more, that nothing would stop him from living a life of restoration, forgiveness and love. No amount of hatred that the world could direct his way could prevent him from living the life he came to live. No earthly powers could rob him of his purpose.

Even in the beautiful mystery of that mountain, Moses, Elijah and Jesus named the realities of the world in which they – and we – live. God knows the pain that we encounter in this world. Maybe it’s comforting to know that even Jesus sometimes needed a “pep talk,” that even Jesus needed people who understood just how difficult the road can be. As he gazed out from that mountain to the horrific path that awaited him, he needed someone older and wiser, a Moses, an Elijah, to remind him that nothing on this earth could separate him from the love of God. Nothing. That was God’s truth for Jesus. That is God’s truth for each of you. And it is especially true as you cry out for God’s healing. Let us not lose hope as we anticipate the Lenten journey. Let us open ourselves to the possibility of being granted failure, and let us hold on to the truth that death will never have the final word. The promise of Easter awaits us even now. Thanks be to God. Amen.