***SIGNS OF GREATNESS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

February 7, 2016

Texts: Psalm 96:1-4a and Luke 9:28-43

 There is a football game being played this evening somewhere among all the commercials – or so I am told. Among the story lines around this game are two that involve greatness – one for each team. For the Denver Broncos and Peyton Manning there is a debate about where he stands among the great quarterbacks of all time; a win for the Broncos and second Super Bowl ring for Manning would boost his place in that pantheon. For the Carolina Panthers, a Super Bowl victory would place them in elite company – among the few teams that have won a Super Bowl with just a single loss all season; a convincing victory will spark discussion about these Panthers as one of the great teams of all time.

 The greatest team, the greatest quarterback – we are a culture that is obsessed with *greatness*, even if we cannot clearly define what *greatness* is. Donald Trump repeatedly declares that he would be a “great president” who would do “great things” without ever clarifying what *great things* he would do. Muhammed Ali claimed the moniker, “The Greatest”, while Tom Brokaw called the men and women who led us through World War II “The Greatest Generation”. Some Americans live in the Great Plains, some in the Great Smokey Mountains, and some near the Great Lakes. Various inventions have been described as “the greatest thing since sliced bread” which of course raises the question, “What was the greatest thing before sliced bread?” For a long time, Frosted Flakes were “Grrreat!” and now every television show is advertised as “great”, every athlete claims to be part of a “great team” that makes “great plays”, every fast food restaurant and car dealer offers a “great deal”, the internet is full of “great ideas”, and you are hoping to hear a “greatsermon” for a change, and eventually you begin to wonder if anyone has any idea what *great* really is anymore!

 All of which brings us to these passages from Scripture in which the psalmist declares, “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised” and in which Luke describes the crowd around Jesus as “astounded at the greatness of God” after his healing of the boy possessed. Is this *greatness* of God any different from all the other *great* things in our *great* lives?

 The Greek word we translate as “greatness” is chosen by Luke with some care, for it is a word that is used only of God or the attributes of God. While in English we may lump a host of things together as *great*, Luke chooses a word that is uniquely divine – God’s *great* is unlike the *great* of any other person, place or thing! What that great looks like is illustrated by Luke’s account of those events that sparked such wonder and awe of God.

The first of those events is the Transfiguration – that awesome moment on the top of the mountain when Jesus’ appearance changes and he is seen in glowing radiance with Moses and Elijah. There is no hint of such a divine event when Jesus takes James, Peter, and John up the mountain to pray. There have been hints of Jesus’ divine identity, but the disciples did not yet understand who Jesus was even though Peter had confessed him to be the Messiah of God. They expected the Messiah to be powerful, like one who casts out demons and heals the sick and feeds a crowd with a handful of loaves and a couple of fish. They expected the Messiah to be wise, confounding the brightest of the scribes and elders. Jesus was all of those things; they had seen and heard it for themselves! But his words about the rejection, suffering and death to come made no sense to them and raised questions about whether Jesus could really be the Messiah – or not. Who was he really – and what did he want from them?

Perhaps the questions with which the disciples wrestled are not unlike those with which we wrestle: Who is this Jesus and what does he want from us? Disciples are not those who never raise such doubts or questions, but those who trust in Jesus enough to dare to follow him in the midst of the doubts and questions that arise along the way. Each week we gather here to worship God and to wrestle together with the questions that arise in seeking to be faithful disciples of the One we believe to be the Messiah of God – the one who does great things but who also suffered greatly and died for us.

The Transfiguration is Luke’s answer to those questions with which the disciples and we wrestle. The disciples’ doubts about Jesus’ identity on their way up the mountain were dispelled by their experience on the top of the mountain. Luke tells us what happened there, so that we might believe what those disciples came to believe – that Jesus was God’s Son, God’s chosen one, the Messiah. What he tells us is this: on that mountaintop they saw Jesus change before their eyes – transfigured, shining, radiant, and standing in the presence of two long dead titans of the faith – Moses and Elijah. They saw Moses the bearer of the law and Elijah the giant among prophets standing with Jesus in all God’s glory and confirming the path of suffering, death and deliverance of which he had spoken. They saw a cloud descend upon them like the cloud that descended upon Moses when God came to him on Mt. Sinai, and they heard the voice of God speak from the cloud, saying: “This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!”

If the questions on their minds had been, “Who is this and what does he want of us?” the divine answer on the mountaintop was, “This is the son of God, the Chosen One. Listen to him!” As the Son of God he bears the authority of God in what he does and in what he says, and our response as disciples is to listen. One writer has even suggested that if God had only nine words to say to us they might be those spoken on the mountaintop: *This is my Son, the Chosen One; hear him![[1]](#endnote-1)*

Hear him when he says: Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich.

Listen to him when he says: Come to me all you who are weary and

heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Listen to him when he says: I am the good shepherd. I am the light of

the world. I am the way, the truth and the life.

Listen to him when he says: Love your enemies and pray for those

who persecute you.

Listen to him when he says: Turn the other cheek.

Listen to him when he says: Forgive not seventy times, but seventy

times seven.

Listen to him when he says: I will be with you always.

Listen to him when he says: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed

into human hands.

The disciples had a difficult time listening to him. Or perhaps they listened but didn’t hear or didn’t understand or didn’t like what they heard, especially the last of those words: *The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.*

It is hard to imagine that the same Jesus whose face could shine on the mountain, the same Jesus who could be claimed as Son and Chosen One by God, the same Jesus who could cast out an unclean spirit and heal a frothing boy, could be betrayed into *human* hands. What power could *human* hands have over the chosen one? Yet, even on the mountaintop the topic of discussion among Jesus, Moses and Elijah was his betrayal, death, and resurrection when he went down from that mountain and back into the world. And Jesus did just that. – came down from that holy peak to live and serve and die among us. Back to the world he came,

back to the world of the living and the dying,

back to the world where people suffer and an only child is convulsed

by a spirit,

back to a world where cancer strikes and nations make war on one

another and people don’t listen again and again and again,

back to that faithless and perverse generation which is our generation too.

Back to our world he came without his shining face and radiant clothes, back to the dirt and the dust, back to the pain of a hurting world, back to the road to Calvary. How tempting it must have been to linger on the mountain and bask in the glory. But he came back - to us, for us, - to be betrayed into human hands. Not only in his shining face beside Moses and Elijah but also in his humble return to our midst is the greatness of God and the greatness of God’s love visible.

And what Jesus did upon his return from that mountain caused the people to be awed by the greatness of God. It was his healing of that only son who was so tormented by the Spirit that amazed them. Did you hear the detail with which Luke describes the boy’s pain?

*Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. It dashes him to the ground in convulsions*.

It is excruciating detail, yet Luke’s description of the healing is short and sweet: *Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father*. Suffering comes in a variety of forms and magnitudes, but no suffering is too great for the simple touch or healing word of God. The focus for Luke is not upon the healing, but upon the healer, and in that healer the people recognized the great hand of God at work.

In these two stories – one on a mountaintop far removed from the crowd and one at the foot of the mountain in the midst of the crowd – the greatness of God was revealed in Jesus, the Son of God, and the people recognized it. It is divine greatness that far exceeds any human greatness, divine greatness that is worthy of hope, worthy of praise, worthy of awe, worthy of faith, and worthy of our faithful response which is this: Listen to him! Please listen to him! Amen

1. R. Alan Culpepper, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol.IX, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995, p.207 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)