

Luke 9: 18–21

February 18, 2010

Central to this Gospel text are the questions, “who do the crowds say that I am”? and, “but who do you say that I am?” First, the disciples reported the crowds as thinking that Jesus might be Elijah or John the Baptist or a resurrected prophet. Peter speaks firmly: you are the Messiah of God. Jesus sternly told them to not to tell anyone. Then, he said, the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Then, he told them that to follow him, they must take up their cross daily and follow Jesus.

Certainly, the disciples must have been baffled. What seemed like a curious open ended question turned into a sermon on a topic no one would want to hear. Suffering? Crucifixion? The disciples most certainly shared the common, but varied ideology concerning the identity of the Messiah. It could be a royal king like Solomon, a prophet or a rabbi, but Jesus was not like any of these. The crowd aptly described Jesus’ appearance, his work and his effect on them which easily evoked John, Elijah and Moses.

Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah was a breathtaking intuition that God had something very different in mind than the standard cultural assumptions about the Messiah.

The Messianic tradition was expansive about whom might be qualified to be the Messiah: kings, priests, scribes or prophets, but they all were to function to restore Israel and Jerusalem to the glory of David’s and Solomon’s reign. This was a longing for Israel to be a star in the crowns of the world’s powerful and wealthy royalty. It was not a vision of the Kingdom of God whose representative was a scruffy prophet preaching to and healing sinners, the poor and the broken.

Following Jesus was as counter-cultural then as it is today. To think of discipleship’s reward as carrying one’s cross rather than receiving the largesse that members of the King’s retinue expect was and is strange. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 holds up the same choice that Jesus lays before the disciples. It is essentially the same theme. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” If you obey my commandments to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, then you shall live and become numerous. God’s commandments are a counter-cultural standard for getting ahead in life where coveting, violence and taking from others usually works. God tells them, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you. “ God obviously has in mind a greater life than the world really imagines.

By sending Christ into the world is to send us a man fully animated by the Torah. Christ is a living, breathing example of God’s life-giving commandments. Christ is the example that conforming to God’s way sets one in opposition to the way of the world and requires carrying one’s cross daily. The world resists God and will resist those who follow God. When God says “choose life”, it is not just in the spiritual sense. It is in the material sense of God’s intention in Creation for all. We all know that sin can create advantage over others. If one sacrifices those advantages so that all may live, one lives in accordance with God’s will. If one proclaims this, one becomes a threat to the dominant paradigm. It is the Cross, but it will bring in God’s vision of life for us.

God's breath animates every soul in creation, and provisions us to live according to God's purposes. We are all capable of living happily, bountifully, loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. The wisdom of God is that by conforming to God's way is to choose life. It is a brilliant contradiction to human logic which is to take every advantage one can to get ahead. Christ emphatically describes this as the way of death. To follow Christ is to challenge worldly wisdom which means opposing the dominant and sinful paradigm. The fruit of that non-conformity is the flowering of the kingdom of God on earth. Christ exhorts us to let go of the idols of wealth and power that strip others of a decent life and to be made new. He exhorts us to be merciful, to be healers not only of the spirit but of the world. He exhorts us to carry our Cross in opposition to sin so that it may well with us. He exhorts us to choose life. Amen.

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