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The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

August 6, 13, 20, 27, and September 3
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August 6, The Transfiguration: Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

In what follows we shall focus on Luke's Transfiguration narrative (a profound event!), and then offer a few summary comments about 9:37-43.

In the verses that precede Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration, Luke points out that Jesus, the Son of Man (the true People of God; see Daniel 7:13), is present at every moment through history. Yes, He would be present when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. With the destruction of Jerusalem, Christianity broke free of the narrow limitations of Judaism and reached out to the world-at-large to establish a radically different worldwide Kingdom. As the disciples began to understand, the Final Age of the world broke in with Jesus' Person and ministry. Jesus did not focus merely on "getting people into heaven." He focused on helping people understand that to belong to Him is to belong to His Heavenly Kingdom now and forever. He calls His brothers and sisters to live now (in this present world) as they will then (after He finally reappears).

9:28: Where the transfiguration event took place is not known. Some suggest that it took place on Mt. Hermon (in present-day Lebanon). However, what matters is not locality, but implication. Luke tells us that Jesus went up on a (nameless) mountain to pray—a detail found only in Luke's account of the transfiguration). We read frequently of Jesus praying before great events in His ministry.

Only Luke makes reference to a time frame of "about eight days." Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2 refer to "after six days." Perhaps Matthew and Mark have in mind a Sabbath day—and Jesus has come to bring endless everyday rest to His brothers and sisters. Perhaps Luke links eight to the first day of the week (seven plus one), Sunday—the day of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus takes with Him Peter, James, and John—His inner circle.

9:29: While Jesus is praying, the appearance of His face changes and His clothes become dazzling white. The radiance of the divine glory that once descended from heaven upon the face of Moses (see Exodus 34:29-34) now transforms Jesus' appearance and reveals His true identity.

9:29: The three men now see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus. However, both Moses and Elijah met and spoke with God at Mt. Sinai; see Exodus 19:1-8, ch. 24; 1 Kings chs. 18-19. The entire world-view of the disciples had been fashioned by what these two key figures from the past represented. The truths that surfaced during the transfiguration event summoned the disciples to rethink those world views!

9:30-31: Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about (Greek text) His coming exodus (rescue event) that He is about to complete in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, few translations make use of these terms when referring to the contents of the conversation. However, Jesus came to carry out a “final exodus,” a “final rescue” of God’s people—something that He achieved once and for all when He gave up His life on a cross and was vindicated in His resurrection. After all, Jesus did not come merely to rescue His people from the political dominion of Rome; He came to rescue them from the spiritual dominion of the powers of Satan, sin, and death.

9:32: No doubt, Jesus is strengthened by His visit with Moses and Elijah—even as He is eventually strengthened by the visit of the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although the disciples are weary from lack of sleep on the Mount of Transfiguration, they manage to stay awake—and see Jesus’ glory and the two great men who speak with Him. However, they do fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to Jesus “completing His Final Exodus” through His passion and crucifixion.

9:33-34: As Moses and Elijah depart from Jesus’ presence, Peter suggests to Jesus that he and the other two disciples should build three tents—one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, Luke states that Peter did not understand the implications of what he was saying. Was Peter suggesting that the messianic celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (or Tents) was at hand? Tabernacles was a word rich in meaning, with links to Moses’ Tabernacle that was filled with God’s glory, of God’s constant care for His people during the wilderness wanderings, of the Holy of Holies of Solomon’s Temple, of the messianic day; see Exodus 40:35; Leviticus 23:43; 1 Kings 8:11f; Zechariah 14:16-19.

V. 35: The voice that speaks in this verse expresses a profound truth. It reflects Psalm 2:7 (a coronation psalm) and declares that, in Jesus, the Davidic line of kings was being restored—even though Jesus was a radically different kind of king from David. “Listen to Him” reflects Deuteronomy 18:15, and states that in Jesus, a new, final, and radically different kind of “prophet Moses” has appeared on the scene.

V. 36: After the heavenly voice has spoken, Jesus is seen to be alone. The three disciples keep silent, and say nothing to anyone about what they have seen and experienced. The truths that surface in this event are profound. God has shown up in the flesh-and-blood Person of Jesus. Jesus is the long-awaited King—but a King very different from what the Jewish people were waiting for. Jesus is indeed the final, long-awaited prophet. However, He will teach a way of life very different from that embraced by the Judaism of Jesus’ day.

9:37-43: When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he had to deal with a mob swept into sensuous religious worship. When Jesus descends from the Mount of Transfiguration, He sees a day “darken into night” because of the people’s unbelief. There is a touch of pity in the father’s appeal, “my only child.” Jesus addresses His audience as a “faithless and perverse generation.” Eventually, Jesus heals the boy by rebuking the spirit that occupied him—and then gives him back to his father.

Worthy of thought: In Mark’s narrative, the first thing Jesus does when beginning His ministry to the Jewish people is to cast a demon out of a man in a synagogue—on a Sabbath day; see 1:21-28. The first thing He does when beginning His ministry to the non-Jews is to cast a host of demons out of a Gentile in the Decapolis; see 5:1-20. In like manner, the first thing Jesus does after His identity and mission are revealed in a grand and glorious manner in His transfiguration is to cast out a demon.

August 13, The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 14:22–33

In Matthew 14:13–21, we read of Jesus feeding 5,000 men, plus women and children. It is significant that women and children were among those who were fed, and that the disciples (men!) served them. Traditional practice was that women should serve men.

In Matthew 14:22–33, we read of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee and stilling a storm at sea.

14:22: Jesus tells the disciples to get into a boat and precede Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. (We are not told at this point how Jesus Himself planned to get to the other side.) Eventually, Jesus dismisses the crowds—no doubt, those who had participated in the feeding miracle.

14:23: Jesus then goes up on a mountain and prays—alone—until evening comes.

14:24: The disciples, who are now some distance from shore, find their boat being tossed about by turbulent waves, for “the wind was against them.”

14:25: “During the fourth watch of the night,” Jesus came walking toward them on the sea. Although the NRSV translates this section, “early in the morning,” the Greek text states, “And in the fourth watch of the night.” The fourth watch was from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. The Romans divided the twelve hours between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. into four equal parts called “watches.”

14:26: When the disciples see Jesus walking toward them across the water, they are terrified. They think they are seeing a ghost. (According to 14:1–2, Herod thought of Jesus as perhaps a ghostly apparition of John the Baptist come back to life.) However, Jesus is about to deepen their understanding of who He really is.

14:27: Jesus exhorts them to be courageous and not be afraid. The Greek words translated as “It is I” in the NRSV are *ego eimi*, “I AM.” They are an awesome formula of self-revelation; see Exodus 3:14. Jesus presents Himself to His disciples as the incarnate and saving presence of the eternal God.

14:28–31: When Peter asks Jesus to enable him also to walk on the water, Peter disembarks, apparently walks a short distance on the water, and then begins to sink into it. Jesus comes to Peter’s rescue—but also rebukes him gently for his lack of faith.

14:32: After Jesus and Peter get into the boat, the wind dies down.

14:33: Those who remain in the boat pay homage to Jesus and say, “Truly, You are the Son of God.” Their eyes are opening! Jesus can do more than walk on water; He can still storms at sea! Although the Jewish people were afraid of the deep, Jesus’ actions point to the fact that the Creator and Owner of the universe has power over every aspect of the created order. Here note Psalm 77:19; 107:23–32; Job 9:8; 38:16; Sirach 24:4, 6.

But there is more. The entire incident conjures up images of the early church suffering torments of persecution and experiencing doubts about the presence and power of the Lord. However, God’s people, who know Jesus as the “I AM,” have cause to rejoice—and the confidence to know that their cries of “Lord, have mercy!” are always heard and acted on by the Lord of creation, time, and eternity. God may not always do what people desire, but He will always do what is in keeping with His good and gracious will.

August 20, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 15: (10–20) 21–28

In Matthew 15:1–9, Jesus deals with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, who rebuke Him for permitting His disciples to ignore the tradition of the elders in relation to washing hands prior to eating. Jesus responds by pointing out that they themselves manipulate God’s commandments regarding honoring and obeying parents. In vv. 10–20, Jesus points out that what people place into their mouth and eat does not defile them; after all, it eventually passes through the body into the sewer. Defilement comes from the evil thoughts and deeds that arise within the heart and flow forth to life in the world.

In Deuteronomy 7:1–2, the ancient Israelites are told to destroy seven nations that live on and within their borders—among them, the Canaanites. They are never to make any kind of covenant with them or show them any mercy. To be aware of this is to understand more clearly that Matthew’s account of Jesus showing mercy toward an unclean Canaanite woman and healing her demon-possessed daughter contains a powerful message.

15:21: In Mark 7:24–30, the woman is referred to as a Gentile *Syrophoenician*. Tyre and Sidon, referred to in Matthew 15:21, are in Syrophenicia (modern-day Lebanon). In Matthew’s narrative, these pagan cities have been referred to previously as more open to God than the Jewish cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida (11:20–22).

15:22: This Gentile Canaanite calls out to Jesus and addresses Him as “*Lord, Son of David*.” This is a remarkable confession from a non-Jew! In the Gospels, it is often people such as this woman and the blind who address Jesus in this manner; see Mark 10:46–52. The woman’s story parallels that of the Roman centurion (8:5–13). At the same time, her attitude is the opposite of the authorities from Jerusalem (vv. 1–20).

15:23: Jesus has already exorcized demons in Gentile territory (8:28–34) and Galilee (9:32; 12:22–23). However, He now meets the woman’s request with stony silence. Not only that, but Jesus’ disciples ask

Him to send her away, “for she keeps shouting after us.”

15:24: Jesus’ first words seem to be a chilling “No!” He states that His mission, like that of John the Baptist, is to turn Israel (a nation that looked on itself as God’s “chosen people”) wholeheartedly to God, and only rarely and exceptionally does He have contact with Gentiles.

15:25: But the woman approaches Jesus, kneels before Him, and renews her plea.

15:26: Jesus responds with a seemingly harsh little parable, “It is not fair to take the children’s food (gifts for the people of God) and throw it to the dogs” (*Gentiles*; see 7:6).

15:27: The woman humbly plays along with Jesus’ seemingly harsh image and urges Him to take it one step further: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”; see 8:11-12. Her point is: God’s bounty is large enough for all creatures great and small, near and far—for both Israel and all other nations.

15:28: It would seem that this quick-minded woman has both wit and wisdom. However, Jesus comments about her great faith and grants her request. The daughter is healed immediately! The narrative extols God’s faithfulness to Israel, and depicts the power of boundary-crossing faith. And Jesus showed mercy toward one of whom the Jews were told they should not show mercy!

The implications of Jesus’ actions for today’s world are huge. Sad to say, people in many corners of the world look on themselves as specially privileged and blessed by God—and link their view of things to national identity and their lifestyle and level of affluence. Soon after I began my ministry in New Zealand in 1956, I was privileged to watch a documentary produced by the national Presbyterian Church. The focus of the production had to do with levels and affluence and lifestyles around the world. One of the speakers stated something I shall never forget: “While but one person on Planet Earth lacks access to healthful food, safe water, and basic healthcare, we cannot sleep in peace!” How true *then*, and how true *now*!

August 27, The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 16:13–20

The Setting (16:13–16): After carrying out a ministry in Galilee (plus the Decapolis and Syrophoenicia), Jesus leads the disciples to the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi—situated about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was ruled by Philip, a son of Herod the Great (4 BC–AD 34). Philip rebuilt the town of Paneas and renamed it Caesarea *Philippi* to honor the Roman Emperor and to distinguish the location from Caesarea *Maritima* on the coast of Samaria.

After arriving in the region, Jesus asks the disciples who the *people* think He, *the Son of Man*, is. They answer: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks them who *they* think He is. Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

In **16:17–20**, Jesus’ responds by declaring Peter “blessed,” and states that what he confessed was revealed to him—not by “flesh and blood” (a Semitic expression for “human beings”), but by Jesus’ Father in heaven. Jesus continues that He will build His church on this “rock” (Peter’s confession), and will entrust the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter, who is to be the leader of Jesus’ new community, the Church. The terms used in v. 19, *bind* and *loose*, are rabbinic terms that denote “forbid” and “permit,”

respectively. Note that the term *church* is used in the Gospels only here and twice in 18:17. The Church of Jesus will not be overcome by the power of death (“the gates of Hades,” the abode of the dead). Jesus then orders the disciples not to tell anyone that He is the Messiah (16:20).

- **Matthew** contains three “Passion Prediction” narratives: 16:13–16, 21–23; 17:22–23 (see also 18:1–5); and 20:17–23.
- **Mark’s** three passion predictions are found in 8:27–38; 9:30–37; and 10:32–45.
- **Luke’s** three passion predictions are found in 9:18–27; 9:43–48; and 18:31–34.
- In **John**, Jesus refers to Himself being “lifted up” as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness; see 3:14–15; 8:28; and 12:31–33.

Matthew is the only Gospel that contains Jesus’ comments as outlined in vv. 17–20. They break the flow of thought found in the Passion Prediction episodes in Mark, in which each section contains elements of “Prediction—Confusion—Clarification.” Although this structure is present in Matthew, it is more obvious in Mark. However, the point is that in all four Gospels, the disciples just do not understand the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus has come to establish, and Jesus has to clarify things for them.

It is not helpful to divide the first Passion Prediction episode in Matthew. The “confusion element” in the episode is assigned a place in the gospel pericope for Pentecost 11. However, it is important that people see the “prediction—confusion—clarification” segments as a unity. To focus on 16:13–16 can result in people thinking that the disciples “got it”—that they understood Jesus’ ministry and message. No! In all four gospels, the disciples “get it” only after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

A poem by George McDonald (once President of Harvard University), which we have quoted numerous times in these studies, throws light on the false hopes that the disciples embraced:

They were all waiting for a king
To slay their foes and raise them high;
Thou cam’st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

To which we might add two more lines:

Thou cam’st to do Thy servant thing,
On cruel cross to die!

Jesus came not only to do *His* “servant thing,” but also to call *His followers* to do the same—full time! Sad to say, many believe that the Christian faith is all and only about believing in Jesus—that He died for our sins, that He has forgiven us, that He conquered the power of death when He rose from the dead, and that He ascended to a far off place from which He will return to take us to His Eternal Home so that we might live in His presence forever. True enough—but His message and ministry had to do above all else with the breaking in of the Kingdom of God, of the Messianic Age. He, the Messiah, had come to walk the way of a Servant-without-limit and to call His disciples and humanity at large into membership in His Eternal Kingdom. He calls His forgiven brothers and sisters to let Him teach them how to live *now* as they will *then*. The implications of His message for humanity at large are mind-boggling!

September 3, The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 16:21–28

In what follows, we weave together Matthew 16:13–16 and 16:21–28.

- In **16:13–16**, Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah.
- In **16:21–21**, Jesus predicts His coming passion, and His eventual return to life.
- In **16:22**, Peter rebukes Jesus, and says that the thought of Jesus giving up His life is totally unacceptable.
- In **16:23**, Jesus tells Peter that he is on the side of the devil!

In **16:24–26**, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to take up their cross and follow Him. Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who find life “for Jesus’ sake” (i.e., they devote themselves to following Jesus in life-long servanthood) will find it. They will find it by giving it away in service to others—full-time, in all that they think, do, and say. After all, people may gain possession of the whole world but forfeit their life in the process.

Much is to be gained by pondering the ***prediction–confusion–clarification*** elements in Mark’s three passion prediction narratives (listed in the previous section).

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus opens the eyes of a blind man in the vicinity of Bethsaida (8:22–26) *immediately before* He predicts His passion for the first time (8:27–38). And He touches his eyes *twice*! He opens the eyes of blind Bartimaeus (10:46–52) *immediately after* predicting His passion for a third time (10:32–45). Why did Jesus touch the first blind man *twice*? What is the message? The disciples understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but did not understand what being a disciple of Jesus would mean for them. Their eyes would be opened only after Jesus’ resurrection when they would “see” the Risen Lord in Galilee (Mark 16:1–8); note *see* in 16:7.

The question for us, God’s people today, is: “Although we believe in Jesus as forgiving Savior, do we understand what it means to follow Him as Servant Lord in all that we think, say, and do?”

The truths embedded in this and the next paragraph have been referred to numerous times in previous studies. In all four Gospels, every time Jesus predicts His coming passion in Jerusalem, He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.” The term is drawn from Daniel 7, especially 7:13. The message of Daniel 7, addressed to the Jewish people suffering under the Syrian ruler Antiochus I “Epiphanes,” during the period 168/167–165/164 BC, is that although they have suffered under a series of foreign powers (the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, and now Seleucids), the time is about to break in when they will be given domination and rule over the nations of the world ***forever***. Jesus reverses that hope and calls His people ***to devote life to serving each other and humanity at large forever***.

The term *gospel* is used four times in Matthew, eight times in Mark, but not at all in Luke or John. However, Paul uses it 72 times in his writings—and Christianity has by and large focused on Paul’s understanding of the term. However, the four Gospels use the term “Son of Man” 82 times—Matthew 30, Mark 14, Luke 25, and John 13. Indeed God’s people need to grapple with Jesus’ definition of the term, and its significance for their own faith walk.

In our confused world, the following two articles are well worth pondering.

The Mightiest Nation

(The following timeless column by Arthur Hoppe first appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle on May 27, 1973, and was reprinted on July 22, 1999.)

“Once upon a time there was a country that was very small, and, on the whole, very good. Its citizens were proud, independent, self-reliant, and generally prosperous. They believed in freedom and justice and equality. But, above all, they had faith. They had faith in their religion, their leaders, their country, and themselves.

“And, of course, they were ambitious. Being proud of their country, they wanted to make it bigger. First, they conquered the savage tribes that hemmed them in. Then they fought innumerable wars on land and sea with foreign powers to the east and west and south. They won almost all the battles they fought and conquered foreign lands. “It took many generations, but at last the good, little country was the richest and mightiest nation in the whole wide world—admired, respected, envied, and feared by one and all. ‘We must remain the mightiest nation,’ said its leaders, ‘so that we can ensure universal peace and make everyone as prosperous and decent and civilized as we are.’ “At first, the mightiest nation was as good as its word. It constructed highways and buildings and pipelines and hygienic facilities all over the world. And for awhile, it even kept the peace. But being the mightiest nation in the world, its leader was the mightiest man in the world. And, naturally, he acted like it. He surrounded himself with a palace guard of men chosen solely for their personal loyalty. He usurped the powers of the Senate, signing treaties, waging wars, and spending public funds as he saw fit. “When little countries far away rebelled, he sent troops without so much as a by-your-leave. And the mightiest nation became engaged in a series of long, costly, inconclusive campaigns in far away lands. So some disillusioned soldiers refused to obey orders and some sailors mutinied, even though the leader raised their pay. And in some places the mightiest nation hired mercenaries to do its fighting. And because it was the richest nation, it worshiped wealth and the things that wealth bought. But the rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer through unfair tax laws. And in the capital one in five were idle and on welfare. When the poor grumbled, they were entertained by highly paid athletes and the firing of expensive rockets into the air, which sometimes fizzled. But the poor often rioted and looted and burned in their frustrated rage.

“Many citizens lost faith in their old religion and turned to Oriental mysticism. And the young, wearing long hair and sandals, became Jesus freaks. Bare-breasted dancers, lewd shows, and sex orgies were increasingly common. And the currency was debased again and again to meet the mounting debts. Worst of all, the citizens came to learn that their leaders were corrupt—that the respected palace guard was selling favors to the rich and sending spies among the people, creating fear and distrust. “So it was that the people lost faith. They lost faith in their leaders, their currency, their rockets, their postal system, their armies, their religion, their laws, their moral values, their country and, eventually, themselves. And, thus, in 476 AD, Rome fell to the barbarians and the Dark Ages settled over Western civilization.” **Moral:** *For what is a nation profited if it shall gain the whole world and lose its own soul?*

How Long Do We Have?

(About the time the original thirteen colonies of the United States adopted their new constitution in 1787, Alexander Tyler, a Scottish history professor at the University of Edinburgh, had this to say about

the fall of the Athenian Republic some 2,000 years earlier.)

A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government.

A democracy will continue to exist until the time that voters discover that they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury.

From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.

The average age of the world's greatest civilizations from the beginning of history has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, those nations always progressed through the following sequence:

1. From bondage to spiritual faith;
2. From spiritual faith to great courage;
3. From courage to liberty;
4. From liberty to abundance;
5. From abundance to complacency;
6. From complacency to apathy;
7. From apathy to dependence;
8. From dependence back into bondage.

We would do well to ponder the above two articles and their implications for today's world.