

. . . Time Change this Sunday: Set time ahead 1 hour . . .

Ekklesia

March 7, 2019



David Gilbert caught a shot of his cardinals patiently (or impatiently?) enduring last week's rain.

Sunday Worship



The Grace Chorale will present a special program of Lenten music during Sunday morning's service. Entitled "Lent: A Journey to New Life," the program of music by Robert Lau and Herb Frombach interprets the forty days of Lent as a journey of preparation as it accompanies Jesus and his disciples on their final journey to the cross. Join us as we mark the first Sunday of Lent with its movingly beautiful and thought-provoking strains.

Prayer Concerns

Available to members.

Wednesday Dinner: Covered Dish

Next Wednesday's dinner will be covered dish. We will provide ham and potatoes. Please bring something to help finish out the meal.

PFLAG

PFLAG will meet Monday evening in Grace Covenant's Fellowship Hall. Social time will start at 6:45pm and the meeting will start at 7. The Rev. Mark Flynn, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Oak Ridge, will present the program dealing with "The United Methodist General Conference Experience: What Happens Now?" Feel welcome to join this timely and interesting conversation.

An Opportunity to Make New Friends While Doing Good

Norris Religious Fellowship members invite Grace Covenant members to join them for dinner at Deans in Oak Ridge at 6 p.m. next Monday, March 11. It will be an opportunity to have a good time while giving support to ADFAC, recipient of a portion of the receipts on that Dine and Donate evening. If you are going, please give us a call or RSVP by email by Friday evening so that spaces can be reserved for everyone to sit together.

Table of Grace

We will serve our March Table of Grace meal next Thursday, 5 – 6 p.m. We are planning pork loin, sweet potatoes, green beans, green salad and dessert. If you would like to lend a hand, you may come at 3:30 to help with final preparation or at 5 to help with serving. You are also welcome to invite a neighbor to drop by for a good meal or you may come by and pick meal(s) up for someone you know who is having a difficult time.

Calendar

Weekly GCC Calendar

Sun: 10:30a—Fellowship
Wed: 5:00 p.m.—Thoughts and Prayers
Sundays *Iglesia Apostolica worship service (1:30 p.m.)* *Thursday evenings/Saturday—Iglesia Apolsolica service & music practice*

11:00a—Worship
6:00 p.m.—Dinner

1:30p—LUAPA
7:00 p.m.—Grace Chorale

March 10—First Sunday of Lent
March 14—Table of Grace
March 25—(Date may change) Leadership Council Meeting with final Congregational Mtg. to follow
April 14—Palm Sunday
April 21—Easter

Not-Yet-Ready Disciples

sermon digest

March 3, 2019

Luke 9:18-24, 28-44

carolyn dipboye

In the coming week, we will be turning an important corner in the Christian year. Wednesday evening, we will gather to mark ourselves with the ashes of our mortality and sinfulness; and next Sunday morning, we will begin our annual walk to Jerusalem. The seasons of Lent and Advent are two particularly significant seasons on the Christian calendar and are strikingly similar. Advent calls upon us to pause and take account of the darkness that invades our world and prepares us for the good news of the darkness confronted by light in the birth of a baby. Lent recalls the severe opposition that light encountered as it moved out into the world and bids us take Jesus' suffering and cross seriously as we assess our own responsibility before the darkness that stalks our world still. Just as celebrating Christmas without taking into account the challenge of the darkness and pain of the world into which it comes is incomplete, greeting the sunrise of Easter apart from taking seriously all that challenged and challenges its good news falls woefully short of grasping and appreciating Easter's meaning. Resurrection and Easter minus the journey of preparation to the cross and Good Friday deteriorate into little more than a nice spring festival complete with bunnies and Easter eggs.

It is entirely appropriate, then, that today we turn our thoughts toward Jesus' efforts to prepare his disciples for the grueling days that lay ahead of them. The significance of that journey of preparation is reflected in the fact that each of the first three Gospels, the Gospels we speak of as the "synoptic" Gospels because they tend to see things pretty well together, depict Simon Peter affirming that Jesus is the Messiah of God and Jesus immediately turning to teach them that he is going to die and that they, too, must take up a cross if they are going to be his disciples. Jesus and three of the disciples—Peter, John and James—then ascend the mountain where they experience the vision of Jesus in the company of two of Israel's greats—Moses and Elijah—and Jesus transfigured before their eyes. Almost immediately afterwards, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," as Luke put it; and all three Gospels turn to walk alongside him on that journey.

Jesus' journey toward the cross and all of his teaching and interaction with the disciples and those they meet along the way accounts for a full half of the Gospel of Mark, almost half of the Gospel of Matthew and over a third of the Gospel of Luke, indicating just how important it is. The news of Jesus' approaching death has, frankly, been devastating. It has thrown the disciples for a loop, and the depiction of their failure to understand in the stories immediately following that announcement do not put them in a good light. Peter wants to build a dwelling place on the mountain and not come down. As they do come down, the power and authorization to heal diseases and cast out spirits Jesus had so recently given them seems to have left them, and they are unable to heal the epileptic child brought to them by his father. As if any understanding of God's mercy and forgiveness imparted to them by Jesus has left them, they offer to rain fire down upon the Samaritan village that refuses to welcome them as they journey on their way. Worse, just as Jesus conscientiously seeks to prepare them for what lies ahead, he overhears their conversation with each other. The topic over which they are struggling? Like fifth graders, they are arguing over who among them is the greatest. "No wonder," Fred Craddock observes, Luke devotes over nine chapters to the journey to Jerusalem; "preparation of the disciples (including the reader) will take some time" [*Interpretation: Luke*, 136].

And so it is with us. We can ridicule those Craddock calls "the not-yet-ready disciples," as if our own power of understanding and courage in the face of adversity far outstrips theirs. Or we can look into their struggle and see our own. Facing into the darkness is not something we come by easily. If we are honest, we would much rather not look and walk the other way. If we are wise, or more appropriately, if we would learn from their experience, we must do something more than tip our hats at their story just because it is Bible. Rather, we should struggle to get down under their story so that we may learn from the picture that Matthew and Mark and Luke paint for us that these are imperfect, vulnerable human beings seeking to answer the call of discipleship. Imperfect, vulnerable human beings, after all, is who we are; and the challenges with which they struggle in answering that call are the challenges with which we also struggle today.

Mountaintop experiences are preparation for faith's journey—not the journey's end. Can you recall mountaintop experiences in your journey of faith? I recall a number of such experiences over the years when clarity and purpose seemed to come into view. Those experiences have not been irrelevant to my journey, but neither have they constituted the whole. I recall some times when they were actually misleading—when a momentary high or good feeling was not reflective of what was actually out there. I remember one year in college when I decided during finals that I should actually be more conscientious about setting aside time for morning devotionals. I recall one morning prior to heading for my final exam in introductory philosophy, experiencing what seemed to be a particularly meaningful time in thoughtful prayer. Afterwards, I walked across the campus feeling very good until a couple of weeks later when I received my grade. I had bombed, seriously and completely bombed. It occurred to me that despite the good feeling, I would have done better had I spent that time in preparation for my test.

Jesus' and the disciples' time on the Mount of Transfiguration was, Craddock acknowledges, "a mountaintop experience but not," he goes on, "the kind about which people write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friendship, music, and quiet time" [135]. Unlike most mountaintop experiences we might identify, the subject of discussion on the mountain was death. Jesus had announced his coming death and the crosses his disciples would also take up eight days prior to ascending the mountain. Luke, the only one of the Gospel writers to speak of the content of the exchange between Jesus and Moses and Elijah, says that the two greats spoke with Jesus about his coming "departure" (literally, his "exodus" in the Greek). The next day, following upon coming down the mountain, Jesus pointedly reminds the disciples caught up in the crowd's celebration of Jesus healing the epileptic boy, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." But, Luke sadly acknowledges, "they did not understand."

Surrounded as they were by talk of death, Peter's hopeful request that they all just stay on the mountaintop is understandable. The mountaintop, however, is not where their or our fulfillment of the work of discipleship takes place. "At best," Alan Culpepper observes, "dreams, epiphanies, and visions can give new meaning to the whole of our experience, making the goal clear in the midst of the journey; but they also point us back to the tasks and struggles that give our lives purpose. The view from the overlook may be majestic, but the road beckons, and there will be other vistas and other transforming experiences ahead"—Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter's Bible: Luke*, 208.

Discipleship is about challenging the darkness as Jesus challenged the darkness. Discipleship, according to the words and example of Jesus, is about something more than stacking up brownie points in heaven. It is about how we live in the here and now. It is about challenging the darkness as Jesus challenged the darkness and being willing to pay the cost. Discipleship is not about hiding out on the mountain and hiding our eyes from the manifestations of pain and suffering that surround us. It is not about donning a teflon coating that shields us from the pain. Discipleship lived out in response to the ministry and example of Jesus is about challenging the darkness wherever and whenever we encounter it and investing our lives in overcoming it.

Discipleship is about living out of the vision we encountered on the mountain, but it is not about skimming across the surface of reality. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected and killed," Jesus warned his disciples.

Following him, he also warned, would mean that they would suffer and die as well. But that would not be the end of the story. Just as Luke relates that upon Jesus' baptism prior to his launching his public ministry, a heavenly voice affirmed Jesus as "my Son, the Beloved," so on the mountain just prior to his setting his face to go to Jerusalem, the voice affirms Jesus as "my Son, my Chosen." The power of this one on his way to the cross, the voice reassures the disciples, is not diminished by the torturous death that lay before him. Frightened and confused, the disciples do not understand. In due time, however, "after the Resurrection, they will remember, understand and not feel heavy. In fact, they will tell it broadly as good news" [Craddock, 135].

And so it is with us. We, too, are the not-yet-ready disciples. We celebrate the good news of a loving, merciful, forgiving God in Christ, but we do not stop there. Our vision clarified in light of who he is, we return to the tasks confronting us. We face into the darkness, not because we are immune to the suffering that is out there. We face into the darkness, following the example of the one who went before us, for the purpose of bringing hope and healing to the world that God loves.

See, the road stretches out before us. Let us travel it together.

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