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“Life’s Downs and Ups” **Sermon on Luke 9:28-43**

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Transfiguration of the Lord
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Luke 9:28-43

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen.

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹ Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the

ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The earth has its head in the clouds on Mount Everest but, at the same time, it also has sunken low in the Marianas Trench. On this earth, there is killing in the Ukraine, while at the same time, some are making a killing in commodities – oil and gas, wheat, and whatever. At the same time... highs and lows, lows and highs.

Even today, the pastor might hear the news from a member about a new grandchild, followed by the one who shares the loss of her brother, followed by the one who had to put dad in the nursing home, followed by the one who was accepted into the master's program, followed by the one who is still carrying the shine of Tennessee's win, followed by the Auburn fan who doesn't want to talk about it. There is a time for ups and downs at the same time, all on God's green earth.

And, in our text, we heard that at the same time, when all was bright and light on the mountain top, down, down, down, in the valley on the ground was a boy - broken, twisted, disfigured. I lift up mine eyes to the hills, and whence comes my help? Up on the mountain at the same time, reside the heavy hitters in the Holy Hall of Fame, Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and the voice of God. Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

Meanwhile, down, down, down in the valley of the shadow of death, is a father whose only child, a father whose only son, is tearing the father's heart out. "Suddenly it seizes him, he shrieks, convulses, foams at the mouth, mauls him." The pain of a child. A parent would switch places with their child in a heartbeat. Such is love. Such is pain.

Highs and lows, all at the same time. That's the way it is with parenthood. No one tells you about this immense joy combined with the amazing ache of love that comes with parenthood. The burden of responsibility. They don't tell you!

They don't tell you this when you get a puppy. Beth and I have a new puppy. So, if I look more tired than usual, it's because we have a puppy. Puppies are bundles of cuteness and love, and at the same time, a puppy is this brainless thing that wakes up at 4:23 a.m. in the morning. Why 4:23 a.m.? Because that's when Mario Andretti delivers John Bailey's *Wall Street Journal*. The puppy's trainer tells us to let her cry it out, but the puppy's trainer doesn't live in our house. And now, I'm up anyway. So as it is of late, I get my monsoon wardrobe on, and get my puppy, whose name is Bella - which in Greek means "terrorist" - up and out the door, and down the road to visit John Bailey's yard. So, it is that precipitation of one form or another falls upon both the just and the unjust. I'm kidding. I wouldn't do that to Sallie.

I'm saying that when you invest in life, whether it be spouse, child, friend, or dog, there's going to be highs and lows, sometimes, all at the same time. This is the price of love.

This is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before we enter into Lent. And up on the mountain, high and holy, cloud and light in form, we are reminded of the mountain top experience. It is a thin space. That place where you sense the presence of God. One with God. A peace that surpasses all understanding. It's quite lovely.

In our text, it isn't really a Rocky Mountain high. For Jesus is talking to Elijah and Moses about, well, the New Revised Standard Version calls it, "his departure." In Greek, the word is "exodon." You hear the word "exodus," well, Jesus is talking about his exodus...his death. On top of the world, Jesus is talking about being under the world. The tomb.

God overhears the conversation and says, "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him." God is well pleased with his only son. His only son. Because his only son chooses to live the righteous life. Chooses! Jesus didn't have to go through any of it. He could have come down the mountain and said, "I'm done with you people. I'm going to start a little coffee shop on the Mediterranean." I'm saying God didn't preprogram a robot.

Like each one of us, Jesus made choices. What's different about Jesus is that at every crossroad, the hardest choice was made. The hardest choice is when it's not about me, it's about you. What's interesting is that God's choices would make us angry. We heard that a few weeks ago, his hometown wanted to throw him off a cliff after his first sermon. Was it because he wanted to institute a mask policy? No, it was because he said that God cares for those who live outside of town, across the borders. All the through the gospels, Jesus seems like he makes people angry with his choices. Some are plotting to destroy him because of his choices. Disciples accuse him of not caring because of his choices. Some denied him. Some sold him out. Because of his choices!

You see, anybody can love God! I love God! What's not to love about God? But the gospels were written to tell us that when God takes on a human form, when God becomes someone we can wrap our arms around, what we tend to do is wrap our hands around his neck. Joys and sorrows, highs and lows. Hosanna! Crucify him! All at the same time.

What is it about Jesus that ticks you off? Is it that he tells you to love your enemy? Is it that he tells you to forgive the unforgivable? Is it that he tells you to be patient and kind in an angry world? Is it that he tells you to let go of your possessions?

Personally, what ticks me off about Jesus is that he comes back from the dead with wounds. The wounds are still there, and I don't know about you, but the wounds make me feel guilty. I don't like feeling guilty. So I'm trying to enact some legislation, and I think I have the votes to get it passed, to have the wounds of Jesus removed from the gospels, a transfiguration, if you will, so that we don't have to feel guilt for our desire to kill the truth. Can you help me make the story a little more white and clean? Remove the stain from our Sunday school. Take the blood and brokenness away. We don't

need to inflict that pain on our children. Take it to the curb, and pray that the sanitation truck will do its job, and take it to the dump outside of town. There with all the other things we want to have out of site and out of mind - the story of slavery, what happened at Wounded Knee, the Holocaust, the internment camps for Japanese, napalm in Vietnam. Put it all there in the dump like it never happened. Put Jesus there in the dump heap outside of town.

On the mountain top, in all that was light and bright, he spoke about his exodus, his death. How he was going to go the thorn way. Wrote the poet,

Take up your cross, and go the thorn way.
And if a sponge of vinegar be passed you on a spear,
Take that too, for souls are made of endurance.
God knows.

Carl Sandburg (from an unpublished piece from a notebook of 1902 and reprinted in *Souls Are Made of Endurance* by Stewart D. Govig, 1994)

It's a choice. Jesus was speaking of his Exodus. And at the same time, a voice cried out, "This is my son! This is my only son! My chosen. Can you help him? He's convulsing and screaming and mauling himself. And I begged. I begged your disciples to help him, and they cannot." And this is the beginning of his exodus. This is where he descends into the valley of the shadow of death. This is the thorn way. "How long must I put up with the faithless and the perverse generation? Lord, it's so hard."

And this is the transfiguration. The boy has changed.

No longer tearing and screaming and convulsing. Death to life. The only son, Luke writes, is given back to the father. We will hear that story again on Good Friday, and on Easter. For our story has its downs and ups!

I have a friend, Chad, who's dad is losing his memory. In our Bible study, he shared that the only time he ever saw his dad cry was at the end of the movie, "Brian's Song." It was about Gayle Sayers and Brian Piccolo. Some of you are old enough to remember it. But when Chad was with his dad this week, his dad was crying. Nobody tells you this when you have a father, they don't tell you that he's talking about his departure. His face transfigured, Chad told us, "What keeps me going is all of you who pray for me, and pray for my father, and share with me about my father." He went from tears to smiling just like that. Joys and sorrows; we are people of the thorn way.

In the end, the boy is given back to the father, and the father is given back to the boy, and when the people see it, they are astounded. They are astounded at the greatness of God.

