

March 2, 2025 – Luke 9:28-36

There are many enjoyable parts about watching my daughter grow up. But recently we've discovered one of the best that I've stumbled upon yet: watching Star Wars together. For an absolute nerd like myself, there is nothing quite so satisfying as sitting down next to her, queueing up a Star Wars movie or television show, and seeing her grin as the Star Wars theme song fills the room and bright yellow letters begin scrolling across the screen.

But there is something a bit frustrating about it, for both of us. And that is that I have seen all of Star Wars. I have seen all the movies. I have seen all the live action TV shows. I have seen all the animated TV shows. She has not. And if you want Star Wars to make sense, you really need to watch everything in order. As it was released. Otherwise you don't really understand everything that's going on.

And like I said, that can be a bit frustrating. There are parts I really want her to see, but I have to be patient. She hasn't gotten there yet. There are parts that she is bored by. But I just have to tell her, "Pay attention. This will be important later." If you're going to understand Star Wars, you need the backstory. Otherwise, it won't make nearly as much sense.

That's true of the stories we find in movies and television and books. It's also true of the Bible, in its own way. We want to just open up to a passage and read God's Word and understand everything we're reading instantly. But there might just be a backstory to this passage that you're not getting. That's one of the reasons why it can be really helpful to read the Bible an entire book at a time. That way, you're much more likely to get all the backstory.

Today, we have a very well known Gospel reading. One that we hear every year. And we might be tempted to just read it by itself. But it too has a backstory. And, in fact, it has a very important backstory.

We know it's important because the text says it's important. Look at how the passage begins. "Now about eight days after these sayings..." About eight days after what sayings? You see, this introduction is Luke almost yelling at us to make sure we read what just happened before we continue on and read what comes next.

He is telling us in no uncertain terms: "Read this in order! There's a backstory here. What Jesus just said is connected to what Jesus is about to do. You need the one in order to fully understand the other." And this isn't the only place in scripture where an author does this. There are plenty of passages that are connected together in this sort of way. But this is definitely one of the clearer examples.

So what happened before this? What were these "sayings" – these things that Jesus said to his disciples – that immediately preceded his transfiguration? Well, as you might expect, you don't have to look far.

The first "saying" of Jesus is a prophecy of his crucifixion. "*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" This is the beginning of Jesus' long road to Jerusalem. The long road to his death. There's a reason why the church calendar is structured such that Transfiguration Sunday is the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. We begin the road to the cross after the Transfiguration because Jesus began the road to the cross after his Transfiguration.

But that's not Jesus' only saying. He also has some important sayings for his disciples. He tells them, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*"

Jesus has begun his road to the cross. But so have his disciples. And so have we. By going to Jerusalem, Jesus is taking up the cross his Father has given him. We are called to follow him on that road. And we have our own crosses to bear. And carrying our crosses will mean sacrificing our lives too.

I spoke last week about the 21 martyrs in Libya who were killed by the Islamic State 10 years ago. They certainly took up their crosses and followed Jesus. But then I mentioned that faith isn't just for martyrs. For we will all die one day. And our only hope will be resurrection from the dead through Jesus Christ.

That's what Jesus is talking about in this saying. You can be like the Corinthians were that Paul was writing too. Gaining the whole world while forfeiting your soul. Or you can save your life by losing it. By bearing your cross in whatever way God calls you to. By follow Jesus wherever he leads.

And yes, you will lose your life in the process. You will not have the life of sin and luxury and selfishness that you could have had. You may even be martyred. But you will have gained so much more.

These are the sayings of Jesus before he goes to his Transfiguration. And like I said, Luke is pretty clear that they are connected to the Transfiguration. But how? How is Jesus' crucifixion and how is our suffering for the sake of Christ related to his shining like the sun? And talking to Moses and Elijah? And hearing the voice of God the Father?

Well, for one thing the transfiguration shows who Jesus is before he takes up his cross for us. The crowds that gathered at the foot of the cross saw him hanging in agony. And they thought to themselves, "That's yet another criminal paying the price for what he's done wrong." But the transfiguration tells us, "Actually, that's the Son of God paying the price for what you've done wrong."

In some ways, it's obvious that Jesus is just as human as we are. Because he dies, just like we will. But the transfiguration makes it clear Jesus isn't just a human. That day, his body glowed with glory that could only belong to God. It was an epiphany. A revelation that Jesus is God begotten of God and Light begotten of Light. Our Lord wanted to make sure that Peter, James, John, you, and I all know that the one who will soon hang on a cross has the power to pay for our sins.

Peter wanted to make the moment last. He wanted to build three tents. And Jesus could have stayed on that mountain. He could have said, "I kind of like glowing with glory." And if Jesus had stayed on the mountain as Peter wanted, he would have been spared the cross. He would have gone through nothing. No whips. No crown of thorns. No nails. No spear.

And you would have no forgiveness, no resurrection, no heaven, no hope. You would have a life filled with sorrow. And then a death filled with hell. And so would I. So perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Transfiguration is not that it happens, but that it ends. That instead of remaining in divine glory, Jesus walks down that mountain as an ordinary man, once again. An ordinary man destined to die a horrible death for you and for me.

He knows it's coming. He told his disciples that it was coming. He talks to Moses and Elijah about it, in fact. Even while Jesus is shining with the glory of God, he is thinking about how he's going to accomplish your salvation.

And give you his glory. The glory Jesus has on the mountain is glory you will share. And when you realize that's the glory he has waiting for you, you'll be ready to carry whatever cross may be laid on you.

You might wonder, "Why can't we skip the suffering and go straight to glory with Jesus?" Well, you can't for the same reason Jesus couldn't skip the cross. There are people on this earth who need him. You and I are the way our Lord cares for those hurting people today. And you and I are the way he gets the message of sin and salvation to all those people out there who don't realize that Jesus took up his cross for them.

Peter would live roughly thirty-five years after the transfiguration. Thirty-five very difficult years. But nothing that he experienced in all those years, no matter how horrible, could erase what he saw on that mountaintop.

I don't know what you'll be asked to suffer in the future because you belong to Jesus, but nothing that you will experience as a Christian, no matter how horrible, can erase the promise God gave you when he baptized you into the death, the resurrection, and the transfiguration of his Son. What the Father said about his Son he now says about you because of Jesus: "You are my child. My chosen one." Jesus' glory will be your glory.

And to make sure you know that promise is for you, so you can remain faithful until death, your Lord at this altar puts into you the same body and blood that Peter, James, and John saw transfigured on that mountain. The same body and blood that they saw hanging on the cross. The same body and blood they saw alive on Easter evening in the Upper Room.

Pay attention when the Father says, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him." Listen to him when he says you must take up your cross to follow him. Listen to him when he says, "The Son of Man must suffer, be killed, and on the third day rise." Listen to him when he says, "I forgive you all your sins." Listen to him when he says, "This is my body given for you... This is my blood shed for you."

When it gets difficult to carry your cross and live as God's child – and it will be difficult – remember the transfiguration. It guarantees that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. For Jesus' glory will one day be your glory. Jesus' backstory will be your future story. Your eternity. Into a life that never ends. Amen.