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Sermon preached at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, March 3, 2019

Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year C

Luke 9:28-36

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Many of you may have heard my story in one of our Going Deeper groups about how and when I got saved and when I found Jesus. That is the old fundamentalist in me talking, of course. Truth is, Jesus has been with me the whole time, and I believe we're always in the process of being saved by God, that is, receiving God's unconditional love poured out on me and everyone else, too. So maybe I should phrase it this way: Many of you may have heard my story of how and when I realized that God was saving me and when I realized that Jesus had already found me. (Better?)

For those of you who haven't heard the story, here's the \$5 version. I was a sophomore in college, and I signed up to go on a mission trip during spring break to Honduras as part of an introduction to Latin American theology class. Like most upper middle class folks with good intentions, I thought that I would be doing all the missioning to others while I was in Honduras, but instead, what ended up happening was that all of the missioning was done to me. My moment of "salvation" came early one evening, after a long day of feeding children at an orphanage, when our group went to the home of a Presbyterian lay leader who ran the orphanage for dinner in the suburbs of Tegucigalpa. She lived in a one room, metal lean-to house with a dirt floor, no running water, electricity provided by a power cord with a single bulb. Ever the germaphobe, I had been living for five days off of Clif bars that I packed in my suitcase, but our guides advised us that it would be a terrible insult not to eat the food that she and her colleagues had been cooking for us over an open fire all day long. Our group of 20 crowded into her combination living room/kitchen/bedroom and sat down in the folding chairs and plastic lawn chairs she had borrowed from every neighbor around, and I took a deep breath and began to eat my courtesy bites of Honduran bean soup served to us in styrofoam bowls. (By the way, it was delicious.) As we ate our soup, a hush fell over our group, and the leader (I have forgotten her name) cleared her throat, spoke up and said in broken English: "I now tell you our story."

For thirty minutes, she told us about the mission and the history of the orphanage she and other Presbyterian lay leaders founded with money from their own pockets. Towards the end, her story got very personal. She spoke of her own life of material poverty, her faith in Jesus, and the assurance she had that Jesus had always been with her, and then tears started to fall uncontrollably from my eyes when she said these words: "You may look around my little house and think I am very poor and feel sorry for me, but I tell you, do not. I am not poor. I am very rich. I believe that God loves me and all of us unconditionally, and I am afraid of nothing and no one. Nobody can ever take that love of God, that blessing of Jesus away from me. If you have a lot of nice things in your life, but you don't believe that God loves you and all of us unconditionally, just the way you are, then you are actually the poor one. The love of God is all I really have, and the love of God is all I really need. That makes me very wealthy." It was in that moment that Jesus Christ himself visited me and saved me, through the voice and testimony of that beautiful Presbyterian lay leader, and my whole universe got turned upside down. I realized I had been so worried about the wrong things, and that I had been so unfaithful up until that point, pursuing a life of selfishness, as 19 year-olds are sometimes want to do. And yet, I felt God loving me and my foibles and failures enough anyway to speak some sense into me through the voice of that woman. I remember thinking: okay, this is all crystal clear to me right now, Jesus. I hear your call, I see your mission, I get what I am supposed to do. Let me stay here, in this place, with this woman, as a young eager college student, leaving my whole life and family behind, so I can

partner with her and work with her in this orphanage. I'll stay right here and do what you are calling me to do.

When Peter and James and John go to the mountaintop with Jesus and have their "aha" moment, seeing Jesus in all of his glory (and with the added bonus of Moses and Elijah, to boot), I don't doubt for a minute that they're having the same experience on the top of that mountain that I did in that woman's living room in Tegucigalpa. The vision they get of Jesus (the vision they almost miss because they are so sleepy) is so abundantly clear, so absolutely moving, so overwhelmingly real, they would have been stupid to suggest anything other than what Peter offers: "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," Luke tells us. After all, why would Peter and James and John have any need of going back down the mountain, back into the real world, back into all those messy relationships and with those imperfect people and screwed up processes, when they could just stay on top of the mountaintop and have it all to themselves?

This is where the typical sermon (one I have preached before, mind you) says, "Shame on us for thinking we can just stay on the mountaintop! Pull it together, listeners, Jesus doesn't want us to be a private club, he wants us to keep going, keep connecting, keep reaching, keep pushing. So pack your bags and head down the mountaintop with Jesus and me right now and let's get to work!" And sometimes that sermon is necessary to preach. But something in Luke's story today caught my eye, something I hadn't noticed before in Matthew or Mark's version of this story. Luke tells us that a cloud comes, in that aha moment, and *overshadows* the disciples and Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Mark and Matthew use the word *covers*, but Luke selects the word *overshadows*. This Greek word is only one other time in the Bible, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and become pregnant with Jesus. This word "overshadows" implies a haze, a foggy mess, an enveloping in a thick daze, stupor, trance, haze, or muddle.

And notice: it is only in the shadows, in the midst of the cloud, that God speaks: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" We always think that we've encountered God, that we've had the Holy experience, in that aha moment, in the clarity, in the crystal clear story. But in this story, God's voice is only really heard by the disciples once they enter into a shadow, a fog, a daze, a mess. Luke here is doing more than just telling us, "listen for God in the shadows!" He is also foreshadowing (sorry for the pun) something else, here too. Luke is inviting his listeners, us, to look for God speaking in the shadows of our everyday lives, and to seek and find the people who have been placed in the shadows of our society as the truly Holy ones of God. Remember, out of all four Gospels, Luke is the one who has a inclination, a prejudice, for the outsider, the marginalized, the hurt, the lonely, the outcast. (The Good Samaritan story, I might remind us, is only found in Luke's Gospel.) Luke wants his listeners, he wants his readers, he wants us, to spend time in the shadows, in the fog, in the daze, in the haze of everyday life, for in Luke's mind, it is in the shadows, and among the people of the shadows, that we will truly hear the voice of God.

Now, my 19-year old self didn't want to hear any of this. Nothing was more disappointing than having to leave that mountaintop experience of the barrio in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where I had so clearly encountered Jesus, board a plane back to Clinton, South Carolina, and resume my relatively boring studies at Presbyterian College. Nothing was more disappointing than to have to return to the haze and fog of the same old relationships, same old people, same old institutions, same old problems and societal challenges, that I thought I had finally escaped in a mountaintop moment with Jesus. Nothing was more disappointing than to think I could have made a real difference in Tegucigalpa rather than my own home state. When I got home, I encountered what so many of us do when we've had a big mountaintop experience: a giant, slumpy, boring, letdown back to my

“normal” life. You might even call that letdown a big, hazy, shadowy fog. Where everything wasn’t perfect, everything wasn’t easy and right before me, and where I wasn’t in control of everything as I would have been if I had stayed back on the mountain in Tegucigalpa.

And that is where Luke is trying to reach me, and you, and the rest of us today: in the shadows, the fog, haze, daze, stupor, the blahs of everyday life. In our everyday existence, in our everyday interactions, in our autopilot as we go to and from our daily destinations, in the people we pass and yet don’t really see, in the institutions we maintain but don’t really think about, in the habits we keep, in the relationships we take for granted. It is in this fog, in these shadows, that Luke believes that God is speaking to us, too, telling us, over and over, “This is my Son, the Chosen one, listen to him.” And what is Jesus telling us in the fog? Remember our Gospel readings from the last few weeks? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the Kingdom of God.”

I have not been back to Honduras since that trip in 1995. The experience in that barrio still weighs heavily on my heart, and I don’t doubt that I experienced Jesus that night in the presence of that leader. However, I can also tell you this: Jesus has pushed me into a lot of shadows since that trip. A lot of murky, unclear places where the path was not clear and everything wasn’t neatly mapped out. Which drives me absolutely crazy. I’ve met a lot of people in those shadows who are in need and who have been ignored by the rest of the world. I have encountered parts of myself in those shadows I would rather not have seen. And yet, yet, it is in those shadows where God speaks. It is in those shadows where God does God’s most holy work. It is in those shadows where a Savior is born into the world through a girl named Mary. It is in those shadows, where we catch both glimpses of crystal clear sunlight and also deep darkness, where God works among us.

Luke is inviting you, and me, to join Peter, James, John, and Mary, to be overshadowed. To let those mountaintop experiences, those Holy moments, those crystal clear times when we’ve experienced God, be counterbalanced by the fog, the mess, the daze, the confusion, the muck of everyday life. For it is in these moments that God speaks to us, too. Can we go into the shadows together, listening for the voice of God?