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2/27/22, Transfiguration, Luke 9:28-36      "A Sleepy Church"

Early last week, I had a direction for my sermon. Later in the week, I got a word from the Lord, leading me down a different path. The worst weeks for a preacher are when you have to stand in the pulpit on Sunday and say, "Sorry, there's no word from the Lord this week" and then sit back down.

The direction of my sermon changed when Russia invaded Ukraine. Regardless of political affiliation, it's heartbreaking anytime lives are lost and cities are destroyed. On a program last week, I saw David Remnick speak. He's the editor of the New Yorker and Pulitzer Prize winning author of the book Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire.

He described how in 1968, Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia and 8 Soviet people went into Moscow's Red Square to voice their opposition, one with a baby carriage. They unfurled banners saying, "We are with you" (meaning the Czechs), and "Soviet Union Get Out of Prague." In no time, they were beaten, put in jail, and suffered the obvious consequences.

Remnick went on to describe how heartened he was to see, the day before his appearance on this show, there were demonstrations on the streets of central Moscow, but also in St. Petersburg, and other cities in the surrounding regions. He acknowledged these protests weren't gigantic. They were shut down quickly, but they were far more significant in comparison with 1968.

Then, he acknowledged the bravery of these people to speak out at the risk of severe consequences. Remnick lifted up Dmitry Muratov, the Nobel prize-winning editor of a Russian newspaper, who expressed shame for the Ukrainian invasion, and put out a video on twitter indicating they will publish their newspaper in Russian and Ukrainian.

What is it that gives people the courage to take a stand at such risk to themselves? What led those 8 dissenters, in Red Square, in 1968, to do what they did? Martin Luther King was murdered in 1968. What gave him the courage to risk his life for the cause of freedom?

As I listened to David Remnick, I couldn't help but draw a parallel with the situation in which Jesus found himself. Our Gospel reading begins, "Now about eight days after

these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.”

What Luke describes as “these sayings,” was Jesus predicting his death and resurrection. The Roman Empire invaded and occupied Palestine and the surrounding region. Rome dominated the Jewish people.

There’s a lot in the news about President Putin’s desire to eradicate dissent. Executing people on crosses was Rome’s strategy to squash Jewish dissent. One scholar suggests, it’s not that Jesus was a particularly serious threat to Rome’s dominance. It’s that any threat was met swiftly and violently.

Jesus revealed to his disciples, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” If that wasn’t startling enough, then he said to all of them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up THEIR cross daily and follow me.”

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to face overwhelming forces. He knew it would result in suffering, torture, and death. In our text today, he did what any reasonable person might do when faced with such a prospect. He prayed. Perhaps even Jesus needed a little assurance. Maybe he needed a reassuring parent to let them know that everything would be okay in the end.

I’ve had one surgery. I think, probably, I offered the most fervent, heartfelt prayer of my life as the anesthesia was being administered. I’d never experienced such a strong sense of everything being completely out of my control. You literally place your life in the hands of other people. “God, I’m doing this because I think it’s your desire for me, but I need a little assurance that I’m going to wake up again.”

I understand Jesus’ desire to go to the mountaintop and pray, perhaps a similar kind of prayer. However, he also took three of his disciples. It wasn’t all about him. His goal was to gather people that would follow in his footsteps. I like to think he wanted his church to accompany him on his journey.

You’ve heard of poetic license. I’m going to use what I call “preacher’s license” and suggest that Jesus took representatives of the church, three stalwart members of the Congregational Church of Galilee, with him, up the mountain.

You know the story. As Jesus prayed, his face changed, his clothes became dazzling white, and the disciples saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. The text says they were talking about his “departure,” which means his death.

Imagine being one of these founding members of the Congregational Church of Galilee and being sleepy in that moment. That’s kind of an odd detail in the story. Luke indicates Peter, John, and James were “weighed down with sleep,” but they were able to open their eyes long enough to catch a glimpse of three of their greatest heroes of the faith surrounded by divine light.

I want to suggest their sleepiness symbolizes fear and misunderstanding. They were told Jesus would suffer and die and if any want to follow him, they must take up their own cross. We might look at their sleepiness as resistance to these facts. But then Peter came up with a more constructive way to postpone the inevitable: a building project.

He said, “Master...let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” I imagine, as good Congregationalists, Peter, James, and John would form a building committee. That committee would get three bids from architects. They’d draft bylaws specifying the exact usage of each dwelling. Lastly, they’d establish an annual offering to maintain them.

I don’t know about you, but that would be my instinct. Honoring Jesus, Moses, and Elijah with a dwelling, certainly gives the appearance of faithfulness. I’d certainly want to hold on to that moment as long as possible, to institutionalize it. I’d certainly be more comfortable with a building project, than going back down the mountain and taking up my cross. Am I wrong that this could be any Congregational Church in New England? We love to memorialize things.

Instead of being present to the moment, Peter wanted to institutionalize it. But before he could even get the words out of his mouth, God’s presence was made known. They found themselves engulfed in a cloud, out of which God’s voice came saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” In other words, stay focused on the mission.

Let me pause here, because I’m making a few people nervous. I’m not suggesting we don’t maintain our buildings. We’re in the business of gathering people. We need spaces that allow us to do that. Secondly, in order for a rocket to reach the moon or the planet Mars, it needs a launching pad. I view our physical spaces as a launching pad for ministry.

In fact, we've had buildings with no people in them for a significant part of the last two years. Like Adam and Eve, we were kicked out of the garden. If these last two years has helped our church and others to see that the church's mission is more about engaging with the world than it is about institutional maintenance, that's one good thing that can come out of this pandemic.

We need glimpses of God's glory. We need mountaintop experiences, but we can't stay there. Faithfulness requires following and trusting that God is leading. Everything we do is about relationships. It's about people. It's not about holding on for dear life, but aligning with the poor and the marginalized, as Jesus did. It's about choosing sacrifice over safety. It's about trusting God is leading us into a bright future, rather than clinging to the past.

Most of us will never stare down a Russian tank. Most of us will never be thrown in jail for resisting the violent and oppressive powers that be. But our story today is a reminder that the call to discipleship is a call to engagement with the world. That requires courage and risk and trust in God.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "I think [this] was something [Jesus] learned on the mountain, when light burst through all his seems and showed him what he was made of. It was something he never forgot." She writes, "If we have been allowed to intrude on that moment, it is because someone thought we might need a dose of glory too, to get us through the night."

On this day of our annual meeting, I just want to say how glad and privileged I feel to be on this journey with each of you. Like the first Congregational Church of Galilee, we will try and fail. At times, we will fall short. We will get some things wrong.

But we will take up our cross and follow Christ boldly, because love is stronger than death