

“A Moment of Decision”

It was June 1986. I had just graduated from law school and was spending the summer studying for the bar exam so I could be licensed as an attorney. I went to Barnwell, SC, for the weekend. My father was preaching his last services at his charge that Sunday as he had been transferred to Lugoff, SC. I attended the worship at both of his services with my mother and my brothers Tim and Stephen.

One of Daddy’s churches, Siloam, was a small county church of about 25-30 active members. The church building was small, with about five pews on each side, and when you stood in the pulpit you were literally not that far from the back row. That day the church was crowded with about 30 people as they bid farewell to their pastor.

Although I was in law school in Columbia, SC while Daddy pastored the churches in Barnwell, I got to know the people well because I lived and worked in Barnwell during the summer. The church softball team gave me a chance to do things with them, and they were kind enough to let Daddy have an active role on the team. He was fifty years old (a little older than the rest), couldn’t run a lick, but he could still slap a hit into right field, and he was their pastor. They enjoyed having him on the team.

The worship service went as usual for about the first 45 minutes, but about five minutes into the sermon Daddy became emotional. He really had a strong bond with the people in that congregation. He stopped, looked at me and said, “Wall, can you come up and say something while I regain my composure?” He sat down in a chair at the pulpit and I could see tears streaming down his cheeks.

I remembered from my communications class in college that this was called an “impromptu speech.” It was a moment of decision for me. But I did not hesitate. I got up, went to the pulpit, and looked at over the audience. They were all looking at me.

I then begin talking and telling them how much Daddy loved them and how much we loved them. I told them how much God loved them. I looked at each person throughout the time I spoke and looked at them in the eyes. During the ten minutes I spoke I probably repeated myself but it worked. Daddy never regained his composure. I said a closing prayer and we then hugged everybody after the service was over.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. In Mark 9:2-9, Jesus has gone to the top of a mountain with Peter, James and John. What took place is a little hard to understand. We can only be reverent as we try to understand what happened. Mark tells us that the garments of Jesus became radiant. *Stilbein* is the word used in the

scripture. It is the word for glistening gleam of burnished brass or gold or polished steel or the golden gleam of sunlight.

When the incident came to an end a cloud overshadowed them. In Jewish thought the presence of God is regularly connected with the cloud. It was in the cloud that Moses met God. It was in the cloud that God came to the tabernacle. It was the dream of the Jews that when the Messiah came the cloud of God's presence would return to the temple. The descent of the cloud is a way of saying that the Messiah had come.

The transfiguration has a double significance. First, it did something precious for Jesus. Jesus had to make his own decisions. He had come to a moment of decision. He had taken the decision to go to Jerusalem and that decision was the decision to face and to accept the cross. He had to make sure that he was right before He would go on.

We often take for granted how difficult the decision was for Jesus. We know the story and often think that Jesus was just following the plan laid out for him many years earlier. But it wasn't that easy. He was looking at his death. In Mark 8, Jesus had told his disciples that he was going to suffer and eventually die. This took his followers by surprise and they were astounded and greatly disappointed. It made Peter so upset that he could not stomach Jesus' prediction and so he

presumed to tell the person he identified as Messiah how a self-respecting Messiah should act. In response, Jesus had to rebuke Peter.

Jesus needed a confirmation of what he was going to do. Even though Peter was wrong to act as he did, Jesus too had to be wondering if he had made the right decision. On the mountaintop He received a double approval of His decision and His choice. Moses and Elijah met with Him. Moses was the supreme law-giver of the nation of Israel. Elijah was the first and the greatest of the prophets. Men looked at him as the prophet who brought people the very voice of God. Both of these men said to Jesus. "Go on."

It meant to Jesus the consummation of all that had been dreamed of in the past. It meant that they saw in Him all that history the Jewish nation had longed for and looked forward to.

It was also important to Jesus that God spoke with him. As always Jesus did not just follow his own wishes. He went to God and said, "What wilt thou have me do?" And God said to Him on the mountain, "You are acting as my own beloved Son should act and must act." God said, "Go On!" On the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus was assured that He had not chosen the wrong way. Jesus saw not only the inevitability of the cross but the essential righteousness of the cross.

As the commentator William Barclay points out, the transfiguration also did something precious for the disciples. They had been shattered by Jesus' statement that he was going to Jerusalem to die. That seemed to be a denial of all they understood about the Messiah. They were still puzzled and bewildered about that. Their hearts were breaking.

What they saw on the mountain that day would give them something to hold onto, even when they did not understand. It gave them a special sense as witnesses to the glory of Christ. When the time came, they had the story of this glory to hide in their hearts and to tell to men.

It is important that God pronounces Jesus both "Son" and "Beloved" and here pointedly directs that the witnessing trio of disciples "listen to him!" This is not just a suggestion for the future, but a claim that everything that Jesus has been saying must be believed and taken seriously. In other words, take that Peter!

What can we take from this Transfiguration story for our own lives? It is important that we look for confirmation of our own calling by God. We may know we are being called to do something but we may still wonder if we are headed in the right direction. We may still ponder whether we are willing to make the changes that we will need to make to follow the call.

I faced my own moment of decision when I was called into pastoral ministry in early 2010. I was certain that I was being called to do this, but I had to make sure. It was a lifechanging decision. I would be closing down a law practice I had built for twenty years. I would have to give up income for at least three years as I attended seminary. I would have to spend time away from my family as I was in seminary.

I received confirmation as I talked to others. As I shared my calling with family members, they all affirmed that this is what I should do. As I talked to other lawyers, they commended me on my law practice, but all said that, “Yes, you will make a fine pastor.’ The judges I had practiced before said, “You are a fine attorney, we will miss you, but you should definitely follow your call into ministry.”

The one conversation I had that really struck me was talking to a lady who was a member of my father’s church when I was in high school. She had known me for 35 years. She said, “I’m glad you finally figured it out”

As I prayed and made my final decision to shut down my law practice and go to seminary, I thought about that Sunday in 1986 when I stood up and spoke for my father when he was overcome with emotion. At the time, it did not seem like much, but that memory helped me confirm that God could work through me in a

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ministry setting, that I already had in place those gifts that were needed to be a United Methodist minister. I reflected on how important it was that I knew those people in the congregation as I spoke to them that day. I realized how my father had confidence in me that I could minister to the people at a time when he could not due to his emotions. It gave me more certainty in my calling.

As you ponder God's call in your life, seek the counsel of friends and family. Continue in constant prayer with God about your future. And think about those memories. Those memories and friends and family will help you make that monumental decision so that you can move forward to a future of unknown possibilities.