

ESTIMATED TIME OF ARRIVAL

Luke 9: 23-36

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Imagine you are on a flight to Chicago. The plane has taken off. The flight attendant has served the customary soft drink and bag of peanuts and the pilot has announced over the intercom that the skies are clear and that there should be no problem making the estimated time of arrival. You nestle into your seat and open up the book you've been looking forward to finishing. About a half hour later the pilot comes on the intercom and announces that the headwind has been a little strong and that the chances of arriving in Chicago by the estimated time of arrival are a bit slimmer. "But," says the pilot, "as you know we are committed to on-time arrivals so we will do our best to get you to Chicago at the time we told you we would." You are grateful for the pilot's effort. Well, about a half hour later the pilot comes back on the intercom and this time says, "Friends, this headwind is really pretty stiff and there's a lot of traffic around Chicago so there is no way we are going to get to O'Hare by our estimated time of arrival. But have no fear," the pilot says, "we are committed to arriving on time so when we get to that estimated time of arrival wherever we are – Lake Michigan, an Indiana farm, south side of Chicago – we will make sure to land this plane. This is how committed we are to our estimated time of arrival." Something tells me that you might want the journey to continue beyond your ETA

What is your estimated time of arrival? And how committed are you to it?

I think we all, if we were honest with ourselves, would admit to having come up with some estimated time of arrival for our lives. I suspect for each of us there is some sort of marker that may tell us that we've

made it. If you're in high school, maybe it's a choice of a college. If you're in college, maybe it's the choice of a career. If you've chosen a career, maybe it's being hired to your first job. If you're working, maybe it's getting to a certain position or level of pay. If you're a parent, maybe it's getting your kids raised and out of the house. If your kids are out of the house, then maybe it's retirement. If it's retirement, maybe it's keeping healthy and solvent. And we say to ourselves about these estimated times of arrival that if I can get to that time in my life ...well then I can relax ... or I can coast ... or I can start doing something I've always wanted to do.

What is your estimated time of arrival? And how committed are you to it?

In our lesson this morning Jesus has taken three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up onto a mountain in the northern regions of Israel and as they are up on this mountain Jesus is transfigured before them. Now no one quite knows what this transfiguration was all about. To be sure Jesus takes on a very mystical appearance; his clothes become brilliantly white, the glory of the Lord is not only evident but overwhelming, and on top of that the figures of Moses and Elijah – the two great prophets of Israel – appear alongside of Jesus. For three humble fishermen this is, to put it mildly, a mountaintop experience. It doesn't get better than this. This is the culmination of discipleship. They have reached their estimated time of arrival.

So who can blame Peter for wanting to set up residence? Peter tells Jesus that he is more than willing to build them some places to stay. Peter wants to make the mountaintop their home. Let's build some houses, Jesus. Let's lock this mountaintop experience in. No need to move on. We've arrived at our estimated time of arrival.

I love Peter. I love Peter because Peter ends up so often saying things that you and I would say. For how often has it been that you and I have arrived at a moment in time – some particular accomplishment, some particular blessing, some particular religious experience – and we want to somehow make this the time of arrival? We feel like we have arrived. We wonder if it could get any better than this.

I remember as if it were yesterday the day I graduated from high school. Now high school for me was a blast. I had a great time in high school. The world seemed to be my oyster. President of the student body. Captain of the basketball team. I was on the mountaintop. I remember the last time I pulled out of the high school parking lot and drove past the school—*I had such melancholy*. I thought to myself, it is not going to get any better than this. There was just no way. Four years later, I'm driving away from my college campus after an amazing four years, having met my future wife, having received a call into ministry, and I said to myself, it's not going to get any better than this.

I'm not sure how many times I've said that to myself. When I left my church in Philadelphia, I wondered if it could get any better. When I left my church in New Jersey to come here, I wondered if it could get any better. And now that I've been here a few years, I can't imagine that there could be anything better than this.

So Peter wants to set up residence up on the mountain because he loves the experience. He has found the glory. Who doesn't want to hold onto the glory? Who doesn't want to hold onto the good stuff? Who doesn't want their religion to be about the things that are good for them? Let's set up shop here, Jesus. Let's make religion about what works for me, Jesus. Let's just hold onto the glory.

But what Peter doesn't understand is that the glory – the glory of the transfiguration – is just a stop. It's just a stop along the way. The father glorifies the son ... because the son is on his way somewhere. What Peter has failed to remember is that just a few days ago Jesus has told his disciples that he is on his way somewhere. He is on his way to Jerusalem. He is on his way to Jerusalem where he will confront the chief priests and undergo great suffering and be rejected and be killed. This is the road; this is the way that Jesus is on. He is on the way. It is a way of obedience. It is a way of justice. It is a way of faithfulness. It is the way of the cross.

This is the promise that Jesus makes with his disciples – he promises them a way. Follow me, take up your cross, lose yourself and you will save your life. He promises a way – but he does not promise a home in the mountains. He doesn't promise an estimated time of arrival. He doesn't promise a certain set of results.

It's true, isn't it, that sometimes our spirituality – our prayers – can be focused on the search for certain results from God. We want to see God deliver on what would be for us a satisfactory state of affairs. We want to get from God the glory.

Peter likes the results. He wants to plant his time of arrival on top of that mountain inside the cloud of glory. He is like the rest of us when we say to ourselves and to God – when is it going to happen? When am I going to feel that ultimate peace ... that grand sense of fulfillment? When will I see the glory? When will you deliver on the results, Jesus?

It leads us sometimes to some sloppy conversation about things like prayer. We think prayer is about results. That prayer is about getting results. Lord, I need you to do this. I need you to reveal yourself this way. And we consider God faithful when he delivers upon our request.

A couple years ago, I was talking to a friend of mine who had been out of work. He had been working for a corporation and got down-sized out. He came to me after a few weeks very happy because he had found another job. A corporate job again. Actually making a little more money. And he said, "I owe it all to God. I asked God to find me a job, and he found me a job. God is so faithful!" Not wanting to steal the joy from my friend's story, what I did not say was, "Did it take God to get you the job for him to be faithful?" In other words, is your God a God primarily of results? Is your God a God who delivers? Is your God a God who shows up only in the glory? The cosmic bellhop? Or is your God a God of the way? A God who is faithful to show us the way. The way of cross bearing and life giving and faithful following.

Because you know when Jesus leaves the Mount of Transfiguration and heads to Jerusalem to ascend Mount Zion and then the Mount of Calvary – there is very little he has to show when it comes to results. A rabbi in his early thirties strapped to a cross is not anyone's idea of results. But Jesus isn't after results – Jesus is following a way. Jesus is teaching a way. It's the way that saves us. It's what that voice was saying in the cloud of glory – "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." It's the voice of the father sending them on their way – listen to him, follow him. I glorify him today, so that you may follow him tomorrow. There are no times of arrival! There is only the way.

Because you see when you live your life in terms of times of arrival, when you make your relationship with God—about God delivering on time what we need, when you think that God only meets us on top of the hill ... on top of the mountain – then there will always come that time when we have to look at ourselves as

being over the hill. Peter didn't want to be over the hill. He wanted to stay on the hill. He wanted to arrive and stay there. He didn't want to leave God behind. But life isn't that way – life is a way. Life is this journey of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God. Loving God and loving neighbor. Who knows where that will take you, but there is no such thing as arriving.

One of the great mentors of my life was my high school principal Bob Schaublin. A faithful elder in the church and a committed educator. He was a principal for scores of years. He ran one of the best high schools in the state of Michigan. So at age 65 he retired. Over forty years of teaching and administrating. Well done, good and faithful servant, they said to him. And no one would have blamed him for taking his dear wife up to some Michigan cabin on one of those Great Lakes and for him to claim his time of arrival. No one would have blamed him, in fact they would have cheered him. Instead though, Bob and his wife went on their way. They packed their bags and went up to Alaska – to teach and run a mission school up there. To work with kids who didn't have teachers to teach them. It was just the next step in the journey. Living without an arrival time.

It's a lot of what Lent is about, you know. Lent is that great gift given to us in the church calendar in which we get to intentionally explore what our spiritual journey is all about. Three days from now on Ash Wednesday the people of God throughout the world commence a journey to Good Friday and Easter in which they ask life's great spiritual questions: Where am I now? Where am I going? What is the meaning of my life? What God-given calling do I have? What sin do I need to confess? What cross do I need to take up?

So we will journey through the Gospel of John. We will reflect on the Revelation to John. We will have our conversations with Jesus – not to submit our order for delivery, but to wonder about the way that he leads us to. The way that has no arrival point ... just a destination in the One who calls himself Alpha and Omega.

You may have heard the story about J. Hudson Taylor. J. Hudson Taylor was a missionary in China during the nineteenth century. He founded the China Inland Mission – which became the center of Protestant missions in China. After forty-five years in China, Hudson Taylor returned home to England, his native country. And when he landed there in Southampton, he was on the same ship as Teddy Roosevelt. And when the ship docked, there was a band waiting for Teddy Roosevelt. And they played the music and the crowd was there for Teddy Roosevelt. And there was confetti and streamers and applause and Teddy Roosevelt was carried off the ship on the shoulders of his admirers. There was a parade in town for Teddy Roosevelt.

Hudson Taylor just sat there. The committee that was supposed to meet him never came. After two hours he put down his suitcase on the dock and sat there alone.

“I didn’t expect a band or a cheering mob,” he thought, ‘but there should have been somebody here to welcome me home.’”

Hudson Taylor wrote in his diary, “But then God spoke to me, ‘Hudson,’ he said, ‘you’re not home yet.’”