

# Stepping Back to See Jesus

Luke 9:28-43

This last December, the parsonage got a little smaller when someone new moved in with us. I shouldn't have been surprised though I guess I was caught a little off guard. From time to time over the past 4 years, I wondered if this new presence might show up on our doorstep one day and thanks to Aunt Kelly, my beloved sister, this guest is not really a guest but really is a new family member with rights, privileges, expectations, and sometimes even a place at the supper table. Some of you who have had similar experiences will know immediately what I'm talking about when I say that Barbie has come to live in the parsonage. She has become one of my daughter's best friends. She has an influence that I often can't come close to matching. She's everything my daughter dreams of becoming and a lot of things I hope my daughter never has to deal with.

I never knew there were so many different versions of Barbie. Did you know that Barbie currently has over eighty jobs she could list on her résumé? She's been a dentist, a rock star, a teacher, a model, a paleontologist, a presidential candidate, and currently seems to be a dog trainer because the Barbie that lives in the parsonage comes with a dog you have to feed and clean up after when he has to relieve himself. Barbie served as a medic in 1992 during Desert Storm. She's been competing in every Olympic Games since 1975. If you took every Barbie doll sold since 1959 and laid them end-to-end, they would circle the world seven times. Barbie is multilingual and multiethnic. And you've gotta hand it to her boyfriend Ken for being patient because they've been dating since 1961.<sup>1</sup> You could say that Barbie is multi-talented. One might also wonder if Barbie is in therapy suffering from an identity crisis. I'm not sure when the next version of Barbie is due out but I'm guessing I'll know about it sooner than a lot of you. I've already heard this question, "Who is Barbie going to be next?"

There's little doubt in my mind that I'm being sacrilegious when I say this but Jesus and Barbie have got something in common. Throughout chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel, people have been wondering, "Who is this Jesus?" First, Herod Antipas hears that Jesus has taken to the preaching circuit and some of the themes sound very similar to a guy he's just done away with – John the Baptist. Herod asks, "John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?"<sup>2</sup> The second query about Jesus' identity comes from Jesus himself when he asks the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"<sup>3</sup> Peter answers his question with, "The Messiah of God."<sup>4</sup> I've always wondered about Peter's declaration here. Was he confidently

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://collectdolls.about.com/library/blbarbiefacts.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 9:9.

<sup>3</sup> See Luke 9:20.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 9:20.

proclaiming this? Was he simply speaking out loud his hopes and dreams for Jesus? In Luke's Gospel, Jesus then goes on to tell his followers that he must undergo great suffering. Do you think the disciples ever wondered who Jesus was going to be next, like a new version of Barbie rolling out in time for the holiday season? Or for that matter, do you think they were wondering about their own place in the world?

Luke's Gospel doesn't tell us much about what the disciples were thinking in these moments but when Peter says Jesus is the Messiah, he wasn't just making a statement about Jesus, he was saying something about himself. He was defining himself in a powerful way – as a follower of Jesus. Peter was not just saying, "Jesus is my friend," he was saying, "Jesus is my savior." Keep this in mind for a few moments.

After these questions of, "Who is Jesus?" we have the account of the transfiguration. For lectionary preachers, every year at the end of epiphany when we're in Matthew, Mark, and Luke we have to deal with this text. And every year there's the challenge of hearing this story in a fresh way.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him and they go up on a mountain to pray. While they are there, the appearance of Jesus changes. You can look at this a lot of different ways but it seems once they stepped away from their normal routine, they saw a different Jesus. They see a different identity.

Also while they are there, two members of the Jewish Hall of Fame, Moses and Elijah, show up and have a conversation with Jesus.<sup>5</sup> And Peter, James, and John experience all of this and were understandably terrified.<sup>6</sup>

One has to wonder why all of this happened. As I've looked at this text again this year and the context of chapter 9, it seems that God has been listening in on all these questions of, "Who is Jesus?" and the transfiguration is God's direct answer.<sup>7</sup> Jesus is God's Son. Jesus is God's Chosen one. This is all stuff we've heard before but then at the end of verse 35, God says,

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<sup>5</sup> When Elijah, Moses, and Jesus were talking together, (Luke 9:30) only Luke tells us what they were talking about. The NRSV uses the word 'departure' in verse 31 but that's not the best choice. The Greek word here is ἔξοδος, and you can't help thinking about the Old Testament story when Moses delivers the people from Egyptian slavery. Here, Luke's crafting of the story reminds us that Jesus brings about a new exodus – a deliverance from a different kind of slavery – the slavery of our sin (R. Wayne Stacy, "Glimpses of Glory: Luke 9:28-36," *Review & Expositor*, Volume 99, Number 1, Winter 2002, p. 84). Moses' presence makes the connection unavoidable; now Jesus will accomplish this second exodus, leading people safely through the waters of death, even as his own flesh is parted in waves of pain on the cross, (Heidi Neumark, "Living By The Word: Altitude Adjustment," *The Christian Century*, February 6, 2007, p. 16).

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 9:34.

<sup>7</sup> R. Wayne Stacy, "Glimpses of Glory: Luke 9:28-36," *Review & Expositor*, Volume 99, Number 1, Winter 2002, p. 84.

“Listen to him.” The Greek expression is, αὐτοῦ ἀκούετε. Listen to him. Don’t just see him but let him shape your life. Don’t just observe how he lives but live your life like he does. The command to listen to Jesus is intended to define. It’s to shape lives. The disciples were to listen to Jesus not simply for the sake of hearing but for the sake of following.

This year, I’ve been asking you to posture yourselves to stand firm in faith.<sup>8</sup> It’s a position where we celebrate where we’ve been in the past, we assess where we are in the present, and we focus on where we’re going in the future. Standing firm in faith is really taking stock of our own identity and where we stand in relation to Christ.

I’ve already made one unsettling comparison by lining up Jesus next to Barbie. Perhaps a more unsettling comparison is to line each of us up next to Barbie. A couple of year ago, Mattel, the company that makes Barbie, announced that after 43 years of dating, Barbie and Ken have agreed to be just good friends.<sup>9</sup> As far as I know, there’s not a husband and wife Ken and Barbie. Who do you think is holding things up? Is it the multi-tasking, multi-personality Barbie who’s got too many irons in the fire and doesn’t have time to plan a wedding or is it Ken whose afraid he might have to ride around in the pink Barbie jeep for the rest of his life?

Is Jesus just your friend or is he your Savior? Is Jesus your good buddy or is he Lord of your life? The disciples learned over and over again that it takes real courage to follow where Jesus leads. What is that next defining step of faith in your life? What courageous action of faith will define your life from this point forward?

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> The theme verse we have been reciting and talking about is Isaiah 7:9, “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all.”

<sup>9</sup> See *Fast Company*, May 2004.