

Bystanders
[Luke 9:28-36](#)
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If you've even been to a Vancouver Canucks hockey game, or even if you've watched one on TV, you might have noticed that during the warm-ups, while all the hockey players are skating around taking shots on net, getting ready for the game, there are a couple of extra skaters on the ice who don't really belong. At every NHL game, they pick two local minor or peewee hockey players – little children, less than 10 years old – and have them come to the game and join the teams for warm up. They skate around the ice a few times, they stand with the teams for the national anthems, and then they leave the ice and go and watch the game from the stands. And of course they leave the ice – because if they stayed out there, they'd probably get themselves killed – or at the very least, seriously injured. Hockey is a dangerous game – these huge athletes flying down the ice, smashing into each other at top speed, crashing into the boards trying to get at the puck – and if you throw a couple of small children out there, they're going to get run over. It's neat to see these minor peewee hockey players get a chance to meet their heroes, to stand with them and pose for a few pictures, but they can't play hockey at the same speed and skill as those heroes. They're not there to play; they're just there to watch.

Keep that in mind when you hear the passage we heard today from the gospel of Luke. Jesus decides to go for a little hike up a local mountain, and he brings along three of his disciples – Peter, James and John – to keep him company while he prays. And there at the top of the mountain, something remarkable happens. Before their very eyes, Jesus is transformed – the appearance of his face changes, his clothes start shining with brilliant light, and two men appear out of nowhere and start talking to Jesus. And not just anyone – it's Moses and Elijah, maybe the two greatest heroes in the history of God's people. When the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, subjected to cruelty and genocide at Pharaoh's hands, Moses came and led them through the Exodus, out of Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land, led by God's presence every step of the way in a pillar of cloud and fire. And when the nation had rebelled against God's word and law and started following the evil King Ahab in rebellion and sin, Elijah came and led them back to be God's people again, Elijah called down fire from heaven and held back the rain and multiplied food and even raised the dead. Moses and Elijah are superstars, heroes, two of the greatest people who have ever lived, and now they're standing right there in front of Peter, James and John, talking with Jesus as if he's even greater than they are, discussing the new Exodus that Jesus is about to fulfill in Jerusalem. For Peter and James and John, they must've felt like those minor hockey players, standing in the presence of their heroes, just amazed and overwhelmed to get a chance to witness such an incredible event. They

want this moment to last forever – Peter even tries to make it last longer. When Moses and Elijah are starting to leave, Peter suggests building them each a tabernacle – the same kind of dwelling place that the people of Israel built for God to live in during the first exodus back in Moses' time, now Peter wants to build one for each of his three heroes, Moses, Elijah and Jesus, so that they can stay there on the mountain, so Peter can keep watching his heroes do what they do best. When you're there watching such an incredible, overwhelming event, meeting with your heroes face to face, it's no wonder Peter and James and John want this moment to last.

And then everything changes. Peter, James and John are having the time of their lives, watching this miraculous event unfold, until they look up, and a cloud is descending on the mountain – and on them. Remember, back in the first Exodus, when God led the people through the wilderness, God's presence was in a pillar of cloud – the cloud led the people all day long, and then in the evening it would settle on the tabernacle, the dwelling place where God lived. And only Moses could enter that cloud, and live to tell the tale. Only Moses would go into the tabernacle to meet with God face to face – when the cloud settled on Mount Sinai, Moses warned the people not to get too close, because if they touched the mountain while God's presence was there, they would not survive. God's holiness and power and might were just too much for ordinary human beings to experience without being destroyed. Peter and James and John know all about this – they know that God's presence is too much for them to handle, too powerful and awesome

for their frail, puny little bodies to experience. And now that cloud of God's power and presence is headed straight for them. There's nowhere to run. There's nowhere to hide. The cloud descends on them and overshadows them, and they are terrified. Meeting your heroes is one thing, but this is too much. Meeting God face-to-face, that's more than they ever asked for. And yet there in the cloud of God's presence, they hear a voice speaking to them, telling them, This is my Son. Listen to him! These three disciples are brought directly into God's presence, and there on the mountain God gives them a job to do. The voice of God speaks to them and tells them what they are meant to do, that very day and every day for the rest of their lives – Listen to Jesus. Listen to the Son of God. Go where he goes, do as he does, follow his every word and action from now on and the rest of your lives. All of a sudden, these three disciples aren't just standing there, watching their heroes, cheering them on from the sidelines. All of a sudden, God is giving them a job to do, a part to play, they're no longer bystanders, no longer spectators, they're playing the game. They're part of the action. And that is the last thing these three disciples want. Meeting your heroes is one thing, but playing along side them, joining the game with them, facing off against the same kind of troubles and challenges that they faced, that is so much more than these three every imagined they'd be asked to do when they first headed up the mountain with Jesus that morning. Now that they've met with God face to face, now that they know that Jesus is God's son, the Chosen One, now that they know they're meant to spend their entire lives

listening to him and following his way in the world, now they know they can no longer be bystanders, they can no longer be spectators. They don't get a cushy seat on the sidelines to enjoy seeing their heroes do what they do best. God is calling them to join in.

And it takes a while for Peter, James and John to figure this out. They head down the mountain, and they don't breathe a word of what they've seen to anyone, because they are still terrified, terrified of what they encountered on the mountain, terrified of what the voice is calling them to do and to be. And we can't be too hard on them, because honestly, we do the same thing. We are following the same God who led Moses to the promised land, who sent Elijah fire from heaven, who spoke to Peter, James and John from the cloud on the mountain. Here and now, God still speaks to us through the word we've been given, through signs of power and presence in water and bread and wine. God still speaks to us, still calls us to follow his Son, to listen to Jesus Christ, to shape our lives after his word, to tell his story to the world around us so that his love and mercy and grace will transform our lives, so his glory can be seen in us. And all too often, we are quite happy to be bystanders. We are quite happy to be spectators. It's so easy to come here to celebrate what God has done for us, enjoy the blessings we've been given, gather and sing praises and marvel at the great things God has done in this world, and then just go home, go back down the mountain and stay silent about what we've seen and heard, keep the voice of God from changing our lives, keep the voice of God from pushing us out

of safety and security into something dangerous and unexpected and new. And that's not what God wants for us. Jesus Christ didn't call us up the mountain and reveal his love and glory to us just for us to be bystanders, spectators, passively watching from the sidelines while the world is transformed all around us. When we come to this place, when we come to this table, when we meet Jesus Christ, we are entering the cloud of God's presence, we are meeting our creator face-to-face, and the voice of God still calls to us and tells us to listen to Jesus Christ, follow his way, go where he goes, do what he does. At every moment of our lives, Jesus Christ has work for us to accomplish, good ways we can transform the world around us through the power of his name, but first we have to get off the bench and get onto the ice, stand alongside our Saviour and follow his every move. We're not here to watch, we're here to play, to join the game, to give our all for the glory of God.

And maybe that sounds like a lot. Maybe that sounds like too much. When you're a peewee hockey player, and you just signed up to skate around the rink a few times and stand for the anthems, and all of a sudden they're passing you the puck and expecting you to play, it can all seem a little overwhelming. But we aren't doing any of this alone. Everything Jesus wants us to do, we know he will give us everything we need to do it, we will have his presence, his power, his Holy Spirit in us, making us more than what we seem, transforming us, transfiguring us into men and women of faith who can change the world. When we come to this table, we come just

like Peter, James and John, weak, tired, inadequate, and here we encounter the glory of God, here we enter the cloud and hear God's voice and discover who we are meant to be. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are no longer bystanders, no longer spectators. Through the power and love of Jesus Christ, we can change the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.