

Mountaintop
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
February 11, 2024
Mark 9:2–9 NRSV

Our story this morning comes from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, it is his account of the transfiguration of Jesus. The Transfiguration text is also found in Luke and Matthew’s gospel, but Mark’s style is shorter, clipped, concise. We tell this story each year the Sunday before the start of Lent.

Mountains and hills are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. In ancient times, people thought that God resided in heaven, meaning the sky, and to be on a mountain was to be closer to God. Mountains are part of the landscape of the holy land, it makes a whole lot of sense that they play a prominent role in stories.

Mountains are awe-inspiring, they are so old, so high. To stand next to one, to climb up its side is to know the majesty of God, to feel small, yet somehow included in something so much bigger than oneself.

The Transfiguration’s placement in Mark’s gospel is loosely sandwiched between two accounts of Jesus giving sight to the blind. It comes about a week after Peter identifies Jesus as “Messiah” and Jesus tells his followers that he will suffer, die, and be raised.

The placement causes me to wonder what it really means to see God? To truly see something is a feeling deep within and isn’t simply about what our eyes tell us. It’s more a knowing of the heart and spirit.

Listen now, to how God may be speaking to you through the scripture.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. AMEN

This intriguing story begins when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain, takes them alone, apart from the others. But he doesn't tell us *why* they went. Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus took twelve to the mountain to commission them as apostles to spread the good news and heal people.

Matthew and Luke say that the three disciples were the ones chosen to step aside for a while. But Luke says that Jesus took them to the mountain to pray, and the story unfolds that way. It does make sense. Jesus intentionally took time apart for prayer and restoration.

Important things happen on mountains. God revealed God's self to Moses on the mountain where he received the ten commandments. Moses, too, was accompanied by three men. And after trying every which way to hear the voice of God, Elijah experienced God in a cave on a mountain, when the breeze stilled, all was quiet.

We don't know what or if the guys talked as they climbed. We can imagine four men, out of breath, sweating, enjoying the cooling air, the views and being in one another's company.

And at the top, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance is altered. His dirty, sweaty, travel-worn clothing becomes a dazzling white, such as no person on earth could clean or create. This dazzle, this light, is what the Bible calls glory. God's glory is revealed in Jesus. Luke and Matthew add that even Jesus' face becomes brighter. But Jesus himself hasn't changed, he's the same, but somehow the disciples catch a glimpse of his divinity.

Pastor and author Frederick Beuchner writes that what they saw was "the holiness of the man shining through the humanness" (Beuchner, an excerpt from *Beyond Words* found on frederickbeuchner.org, 2/9/15.)

As if this weren't enough, Elijah and Moses appear and stand next to Jesus. The prophet of prophets and giver of laws, the giants in the faith. What a vision, what ecstasy!

Peter, the rock, the one who always has the guts to speak out, stammers something about building tents. It is so awesome that this is happening, so otherworldly, and, caught up in the moment, he wants to do something, anything to preserve it. He wants to please. To set up dwellings, to settle in and bask in the glow. So very human and understandable. But life is not static, it moves on.

And then, a cloud. Was it bright or dark? Was it one of those misty, frothy things or more ominous? Biblically, the cloud was a symbol for God, the Israelites followed the cloud when they were in the wilderness. The word "overshadowed" is used in all three gospels, the same word that is used when Mary is visited by the angel and told that she will bear Jesus.

Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes that the “shining cloud [is] a sure sign of God’s presence with a capital P. Further, she writes, “That’s what God’s glory looks like, apparently, a big bright cloud, dark and dazzling at the same time... (Barbara Brown Taylor, Day1.org, “The Bright Cloud of Unknowing, 3/2/14)

And from that dark, wet, foggy mass, where ocular vision was not possible, we hear the voice of God. This, this is my child the beloved. Listen to him. Listen. To. Him. There was a very similar scene at Jesus’ baptism, but then, only Jesus could hear. This is a proclamation for others. You can almost hear God smiling, the way we smile when we talk about someone we dearly love.

It is a little like the passing of a torch. Listeners in Mark’s time would remember that Moses passed his authority to Joshua, who saw the people into the promised land, and Elijah passed the “mantle” to Elisha as he was taken into the sky in a chariot of fire. God is authorizing Jesus’ power and authority before these men.

And just like that, it’s over, and Jesus alone remains with the three as they journey back down into our everyday world. A world broken with unjust systems, filled with pain and pleasure, illness and healing, hurt, revenge, suffering and joy.

Jesus tells them not to tell anyone what happened up top, until after he is raised. As IF. How might one put into words an experience that defies explanation?

I wonder if the memory of the sight of the glorified Jesus sustained them through his suffering and death. I wonder if what stirred in their hearts on that mountaintop was buried under a different mountain of fear, worry and grief. I wonder if after Jesus was raised, they looked back on this scene, and it finally made sense. We’ll never know, really. It’s hard

for me to believe that they were not somehow fundamentally changed... transfigured, if you will, by the experience.

Lent begins this Wednesday, when we will gather to remind one another of our all-too-humanness, of our frailty and brokenness. Our mortality. We will gather to affirm that our vulnerability is precious to God. We will also claim God's goodness, mercy, and presence in our lives, and that regardless of the depth of our valleys, the brilliance on the mountain has the final say.

Lent is an invitation to step off the mountain into the wilderness and risk exposure, to be transfigured. It may be lonely, and we run the risk of facing our ugliest selves, of discovering our deepest needs and desires. And we also understand that we may bump into the God who calls us beloved, and who asks us to step up and out and share love, unconditionally, with others.

It'll take courage, but one thing this story affirms is that we do not journey alone. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that, "most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work so addicted to our pleasure and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need." (Taylor, *ibid*)

I think that some intentional space to breathe, think, listen, to be open to God, can transfigure our lives and world. By this I mean that maybe the world doesn't change exactly, but because of an experience, we see the world with new eyes, listen a new way and a window opens us into a new way of being. (<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/02/20/when-pictures-become-windows-a-sermon-on-the-transfiguration-mark-92-9/>)

Peter, James, and John had a unique experience on a mountaintop. By their very nature, mountaintop experiences are rare. And when they happen, they are terrific and can be life changing. Yes! And the Bible

bears witness to a God who is revealed in boats, on dry land, around the supper table, in fields, in commerce and on the streets. In the most ordinary of places, high and low alike.

The glory of God is all around us.

Physician and author Rachel Naomi Remen writes about discovering God in the ordinary. She says, “People can most easily recognize mystery when it presents itself in dramatic ways. The person who heals for unknown reasons when all hope is gone, the angelic visitation, the life-altering coincidence. We seem to be able to hear God best when God [sic] shouts.” (Rachel Naomi Remen, “Consecrating the Ordinary” in *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, 2006.)

But I am convinced that it is possible to cultivate the ability to see God, to catch glimpses of the divine, to experience tiny miracles that are hidden in plain sight. It requires attention, whether or not you boast 20/20 vision.

Remen tells about how she moved to California from New York and planted her first vegetable garden and found endless fascination with the endeavor. She particularly loved the lettuce, and would marvel at the sight of the lettuce, planted in a neat square, green and vibrant, some of which she’d pick each night for dinner.

One particular evening, after harvesting the lettuce, she lingered, running her hand over the leaves that she says almost “bubbled out of the ground.” As she did, the words of a blessing from her childhood echoed in her ears. She felt as though she was hearing it for the first time, though she knew the prayer by heart. “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe who bringest forth bread from the earth.” (RNR, “Consecrating the Ordinary”, 282–284, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*)

Her heart was opened to the truth that was deeply hidden all along.
Nothing had changed, yet it all seemed different somehow.

Like it did on the mountaintop so long ago.

May it be so for us as well. AMEN

Sources

Frederick Beuchner quotes: The Frederick Beuchner Center www.frederickbeuchner.com

Barbara Brown Taylor quotes: http://day1.org/5560-the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing

Remen, Rachel Naomi, M.D. *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, 2006.

Commentary: <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/02/20/when-pictures-become-windows-a-sermon-on-the-transfiguration-mark-92-9/>