

“On the Other Side of the Mountain”
Mark 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6
February 19, 2012

I must be honest with you that I often find the account of Jesus’ transfiguration that comes the last Sunday of Epiphany, before making the journey of Lent, one of the most difficult sermons of the year. I don’t quite know what to make of the account of Jesus transfigured before the disciples and his clothes becoming dazzling white. But perhaps you share my confession because so many of us are children of the rationalistic enlightenment. We may need transformation by the Word and Spirit of God rather than constrained by a limited rationalism. “Let those who have ears, let them hear,” Jesus said a number of times early in his ministry.

I. Making Sense of the Transfiguration:

In a desire to make sense of the Transfiguration of Jesus, we might conclude what happened to Jesus on the mountain was so wonderful that it was actually some form of hallucination. Some New Testament scholars of a rather skeptical stripe think that this account is a misplaced resurrection account, as though Mark took his ancient computer and did a bit of a scissor and paste job taking something that belonged in the 16th chapter and stuck it here in the ninth chapter.

Skeptics may try to bully us that something like this could never happen; or my own rationalistic mind might lead me to wonder how to make sense of the account for my own faith, let alone communicating this rich account for the congregation gathered in worship on Sunday morning.

In the Old Testament there are various experiences where the veil of ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing the inside of a situation is drawn back and a fuller reality is disclosed. One of those events was when Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God and when he came down the mountain Moses’ face shone to the Israelites. (Exodus 33) When God first encountered Moses in the burning bush is another such event. In the New Testament when the Apostle Paul was on the Road to Damascus the risen Lord appeared to him, initially blinding him, but eventually something like scales fell from his eyes, and he was able to see Jesus for who he really was. It truly transformed the Apostle Paul’s life and eventually the direction of human civilization.

As far as we can tell most people in the Old Testament did not experience this very often. When we read the New Testament, we also find that most of the early Christians did not experience this on any sort of regular basis. Most of us have not had experiences of this kind, even if we do compare it to going up to a high mountain or looking in a telescope for the first time. Peter, James, and John, Mark tells us, were terrified which is enough to suggest the basic truth of the event.

So maybe we need to step back and see things from God’s point of view rather than our limited human conceptions. On the mountain, Jesus was revealed for who he truly was and is. Not only do I see the sun, but the sun illumines everything else. So also in the transfiguration of Jesus not only do I see who Jesus truly is, but also by Jesus everything else is illumined in terms of my understanding of the world and life.

Maybe it is a bit like when we were a child and the very first time we had an opportunity to take a peek in a telescope and view the moon or the rings of Saturn; we never have quite looked at the moon or a planet or the galaxy the same way ever since. Or it is a bit like the first time we looked through a microscope at a ring worm or a piece of our own dead skin or the membranes of butterfly and saw the intricate combination of cells. We realized that there is a whole world beneath the surface that is every bit as wonderful and expansive as the universe beyond. I remember when my wife and I were in Hawaii, and we went snorkeling, actually you haven't seen Hawaii until you go under the water. In all of these ways, we never quite looked at the world in quite the same way again, although sometimes we need to be reminded of the wonder of the world both macrocosmically and microcosmically. Everything has the potential to be more than it seems.

All of us, especially since we live in a rather flat state with not many mountains, have been startled in awe and wonder of going to the top of a mountain in a place like Colorado and found it to be a transformational experience. But even in our state when we go to Sleeping Bear Dunes, which I think recently USA Today named the nation's most beautiful scenic spot, and look out over Lake Michigan, we find that this is truly an awe inspiring experience.

I like what John Calvin says about the reality and meaning of this startling event in the gospels. The three disciples Peter, James, and John were given a "temporary exhibition of Jesus glory." Calvin in his commentary suggests that the change in the brightness of Jesus' clothing was a way that God adapted to the capacity of the flesh and accommodated himself so that the disciples could understand that while Jesus was human; he was more than human; in Jesus is the theater of the divine glory. Or once again, not only do I see the sun, but by the sun I see everything else. In the transfiguration of Jesus, not only do we see who Jesus truly is, but by Jesus everything else in life is illumined.

This is last Sunday of Epiphany before beginning the journey of Lent. We have seen in the baptism, the healing ministry of Jesus, or the early teaching ministry that we are given glimpses of who Jesus truly is. But now on the Mount of Transfiguration, we have one of the most significant epiphany moments that help to reveal not only who Jesus is, but by Jesus everything else in our lives and the world is illumined.

II. Mountain Top Experiences:

We have tried to understand the Transfiguration of Jesus with our minds, but I think it is in our hearts in worship that we can begin to identify and enter into the transfiguration event.

A couple of weeks ago, the Middle School Youth went on a retreat in which the basic subject of the retreat was the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism. The leaders told me that they basically tried to pattern the order of worship very similar to what we do in sanctuary worship on Sunday morning, only the youth developed the content for each of the parts of the worship service. Leaders have come back from the retreat and told me "Transformational; it was fantastic!"

A couple of months ago, I was sitting in the sanctuary on the liturgists side of the worship service. Pastor Kama was preaching. To be honest with you, I have been trying

to get use to our carpentry gothic sanctuary. It is a very different worship space from anything that I have been accustomed. But that morning the sun was shining through the stain glass window from the east, and it was as though Jesus himself was speaking to me through the stain glass window. It was an Epiphany moment and I felt in my heart and soul, "It is good to be in the presence of the God I know in the face of Jesus Christ."

Many of you give witness, perhaps not on every Sunday, but on a given Sunday, maybe it was a choir piece, or some sort of different phrasing in a prayer, or in a hymn that was sung that gave you a new perspective on all that suffering, or even something in the sermon, that you got a completely new insight about the God we know in Jesus Christ that gave you the courage to go on, lifted you out of your valley of depression and despair, or called you to make a new decision when you were stuck in a rut.

You come to know worship as something that is not boring at all, but it brings you into the presence of the personal God who is also Almighty, and in that worship all of everyday life is illumined and given meaning. Maybe we aren't quite there with Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus, but no wonder that we want to stay here and just tarry awhile. Those who criticize worship because it doesn't have any utilitarian value of getting something done, just don't get it. It is like being in love and being able to say to the divine creator and redeemer that we know in the face of Jesus Christ, "I love you," and to hear God say to us "You are my beloved child of God." We don't say to two people that are crazy in love, you are wasting your time. Worship is....a royal waste of time, but only by the Holy Spirit do we have the eyes to see that.

Before we make the journey of Lent and walk with Jesus to the cross, it is good to have some of the glimpses of the glory of God. In times when we loose a loved one, or a child is sick, or we loose a job and deal with unemployment, or we struggle with retirement not thinking that our life counts for much, it is good to have some of those times when we have been up on the mountain with God in worship. By that experience with God, it illumines the darkness of our daily existence and brings hope that the darkness will not last forever, and that not even death can separate us from the love of God.

III. Living on the Other Side of the Mountain:

Peter, James, and John want to make three booths and just continue to worship up on the mountain. Mark tells us that Peter did not know quite what to say, for they were terrified. In other words, Mark is telling us that Peter was talking out of his head.

We sympathize with Peter. There are those moments here on Sunday when you are blessed with a special feeling of God's near presence, when the service seems to leave earth and soar, and you pray that this high moment of spiritual bliss will last forever. But it doesn't. It doesn't last not only because it is hard to sustain the emotion over the long haul, but also because of Jesus. He does not allow his disciples to stay up on the mountaintop. He leads them back down the mountain where there are pressing needs once down the mountain. Jesus is God's beloved Son, as the voice proclaimed, but he is also the suffering servant who is now on his way to betrayal, suffering, and death.

Again this is the last Sunday of Epiphany. Next Sunday is Lent. The Latin word means spring, but we don't get there until the end of the 40 days. First, we have to go

through Ash Wednesday, confession of sin and then we make our journey with Jesus to the cross.

When I was first a conscious Christian in the high school youth group in New Jersey we had some wonderful guitar singing and holding hands and praying in a circle, but then the leader would always tell us that we had to come down the mountain, or maybe live on the other side of the mountain. Maybe that is *traite*, but it is true. In our Sunday worship we do get a glimpse of what Peter, James, and John experienced (it is not completely outside our range of experience) but Jesus also has a way of leading us to the cross and making us live on the other side of the mountain.

One of the ways that we move in our worship to the other side of the mountain is after the sermon when we have the offering or we confess our faith in the midst of a pluralistic world, or we lift up intercessions for the world and then finally in the benediction—go and serve God. Even while in worship, we have to move to the other side of the mountain.

What is on the other side of the mountain? What is it like in the places where we live on the other side of the mountain?

Well, for one thing as Christians, we don't always experience that intimacy and presence of Jesus all the time. Sometimes part of our walk with Jesus is having a sense of the absence of Jesus. We may just not feel him today; we might even feel abandoned, dry, desolate.

Notice what the voice of God up on the mountain told Peter, James and John: *"This is my Son, Beloved, Listen to him!"* It is almost the same words that we heard when Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. The voice of God is telling us Jesus is the unique witness to God. We are living in an age of pluralism that argues that everything is relative and everything is of relative value. That is what life is like on the other side of the mountain. But the voice of God is that Jesus is God's beloved Son.

We can certainly respect people of other faiths and we ought to treat them as our neighbor; we can learn from them, and yet Jesus is the one by which we sort and sift the truth of the world.

At the Transfiguration up on the mountain, something is said that is different than Jesus' baptism so we had better pay attention. "Listen to him." It is a present imperative, which implies what we are to do. "Continue to listen to him." We are not left without guidance and direction in the midst of this relativistic world. We are given Jesus to continue to listen to and to guide our actions and our thoughts

As we stand with the disciples, we share with them the inability to fully comprehend what happened on the mountain with Jesus. Yet we are not left completely baffled. Jesus Christ is God's beloved Son and we are to listen to him. We are not left to fumble through life merely doing the best we can, right or wrong! God's will is given in the voice of Jesus, and as believers we are given certitude of living by listening to Jesus.

The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, in our epistle reading, is helpful in describing what it is like on the other side of the mountain. *"And even if our gospel it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the gods of this world have blinded the*

minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” In other words, Paul is struggling and trying to explain why it is that there are so many people in the ancient world, Jews and gentiles, who don’t believe in Jesus Christ. Despite the preaching and the efforts of the Apostle Paul the light of Jesus Christ just doesn’t make any sense.

On the other side of the mountain, we struggle why so many people don’t come to faith in Jesus Christ. What is light to us, is darkness to them. So many people in our congregation struggle with why their children who were raised in the faith, maybe in this congregation, are ambivalent or even hostile to the good news of Jesus Christ. I know it is on the mind of many members of the congregation because you tell me about it.

My father died about a year ago. And as far as I know (and truly only God knows the heart) remained an agnostic most of his adult life. I wonder why the light of Jesus Christ did not illumine the darkness of his mind and his heart. I think that some of it had to do with his scientific training and the influence of my grandfather who was also a scientific researcher in a day and time in which science was seen as antithetical to faith. But then I can try to explain it, but maybe the best I can say like Paul “the gods of this world have blinded the minds of unbelievers.” We really don’t know completely why some believe and others do not.

In what we call the Third world, the developing world, there is a tremendous growth and explosion of the Christian faith. Wendel Karsen, former missionary to China and former member of this congregation, use to say to me, “Kent, you would not believe what is happening in China; the fields are ripe for the harvest.” But then we are left wondering why in our own land secularization seems to be making such inroads. It is the life we face as Christians when we live on the other side of the mountain.

Paul is not despairing or despondent on the other side of the mountain. He declares, “*For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord...*” It may be much more difficult than the glories of worship on the mountain, but one of the things that we particularly need to do in our day and time on the way to the cross with Jesus is to share our faith with others. We can’t go back 50 years ago to a time in West Michigan when the entire community was imbued with the Christian ethos; most likely Holland is going to continue to become a more diverse community. On the other side of the mountain, we need to learn to share our faith.

Certainly we should try to make a connection between what we say and what we do. Paul maintains with the Corinthians and with those who don’t believe, “*We have renounced underhanded ways. We are not peddlers of God’s word.*” But in the end, what we do is point people to Jesus Christ. We are confident and we do not lose heart because Jesus Christ is the focus and subject of our message and not ourselves.

In other words lots of our co-workers and neighbors on the other side of the mountain cannot see what you see: because they are caught up in just trying to make a living or because of a lifestyle or pursuing the good life so they simply cannot see what you see: That there is a better life that is not about things; that there is a deeper life that is more satisfying. So Paul tells us that we need to tell them. We need to say “Come and see.” We need to say, “Hey, I thought I would give you a call because I missed you at church lately.” Or “I know that life has been tough for you lately; why don’t you come and sit with me for worship; it will be good and the start of something that God wants for

you.” Or “welcome to the neighborhood. I know that you still are unpacked, but God is doing some wonderful things through our congregation and I hope that it can be a blessing for you.”

Conclusion:

We are thankful for glimpses of glory in worship, but Jesus won't allow us to live up on the mountain. He wants us to live on the other side of the mountain in the midst of the world. And if the light of God has shone in Jesus Christ, and by that light all of our everyday experiences have been illumined, then we truly have a story to tell and good news to share. Jesus Christ not only morphed our life, but Jesus can morph anyone's life. Share it. Believe it on this other side of the mountain, and do not be ashamed of Jesus.