

Mark 9: 2-9

2 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, **3** and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5** 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." **6** He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" **8** Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. **9** 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.



Today is Transfiguration Sunday – that day each year when we read the stories from our Gospels in which something spectacular happens to Jesus in front of two of his disciples while on a mountain. “Transfiguration” is defined as a “change in form” or a metamorphosis”. Something changes – shape, form, nature – something different results from a transfiguration.

The story of what happened to Jesus on that mountain has all the elements of what we might expect in experiencing the glory of God. A high mountain, a voice from above, the appearance of heavenly beings, prophets from the past, the awe and terror of the disciples, clouds, dazzling brightness. You could simply read the story and let it speak for itself – there’s almost nothing left to say about it. The theme of God’s glory just jumps right off the page – right out of the words. Even today we might be tempted to just stare in awe at the words just as the disciples stood in awe staring at the events of that day on the mountain.

Growing or Staying

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Mark 9: 2-9

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Transfiguration Sunday



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But that, I suspect, is the danger of this piece of scripture – the same danger that causes Jesus to react to the disciples the way he did. You see, if we get stuck on the “glory” part of the story, we never move beyond it. We grow stale instead of growing in faith.

Whenever you encounter someone who has been transfigured – transformed from one state of being to another – you can usually see it in his or her eyes. When the disciples experienced Jesus transfigured there was a brightness about him. And one can only imagine that his face radiated with an intense light – his face shining with the glory of God.

That same experience is evident in our lives as well. There are many times when the glory of God causes our faces to transform into something new – something obviously of God.

When a child is born and you see the new father gazing through the nursery window at his new son with his eyes as big as a full moon, you experience a man transfigured because of a miracle only God can accomplish – that man’s light radiates in such a way that the glory of God shines through his eyes.

When a little girl comes home from school with a faded-red piece of construction paper cut into the shape of a heart and pasted onto a crumpled white doily with a message in magic marker that says, “I Love You, Mom,” the tear-streaked face of that mom and the ear-to-ear smiling face of that little girl are obviously transfigured by the glory of God – God shining through the unconditional love of a child.

Or faces transfigured by God’s glory when grandparents witness the awarding of a PhD in physics to their granddaughter who has worked with determination and hard work and faith – and having her in the midst of it all acknowledge that it has happened only through the grace of God.

Each of these faces is transfigured – transformed – changed – because of God’s presence in the everydayness of their lives. Light radiates from their faces, eyes, smiles, tears. At these and many similar moments in our lives, light transcends everything else that could have been negative. At that moment when we shine with the glory of God’s presence, who cares about the rest of life? The experience of God’s presence overshadows anything else that ever mattered.

And what do we want to do with those moments in our lives? They are “the times of our lives”, Kodak tells us, and that’s exactly how we treat them, as photo opportunities. We want to savor them and hold on to them, freeze them in place if possible. We snap photos of those moments and we pull them out whenever we want to remember, “Oh, remember that day? Those were the good old days. I wish time would have stood still when that happened.” We want to stop the videotape at that moment and freeze frame that transforming moment when we were transfigured by God’s presence – when our faces, our lives, radiated with God’s glory.

When the disciples experienced the transfiguration of Jesus and saw Moses and Elijah and realized that they were seeing a glimpse of God in their lives, they wanted to freeze frame the moment. Peter says: “It’s good for us to be here. Let’s make three dwellings, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah.” “This is the greatest thing ever and I want to savor the moment forever,” says Peter, “I want to have photos that I can drag out and show my grandkids. ‘Look, I was in God’s presence for just a moment and I was transformed!’”

Jesus had told the disciples just eight days earlier that he would have to suffer greatly before his work was accomplished. And what he tried to get them to understand was that there was more to turning their lives over to God than just experiencing the glory of it – there is suffering and grief, tears and blood and sweat, there are crosses and burdens and weight to shoulder. There is the

flip side of all the glorious, dazzling brightness.

Yet when they were about to experience a glimpse of the future through Jesus' transfiguration they wanted it without the negative side. Let's build our dwellings while we see the beauty of the future through the revelation of God. If we stay here we don't have to suffer or grieve or bleed.

But Jesus says "No." No one is to hear about what you have experienced until after my suffering and my return. To experience God we need to experience the negative of life along with the positive. No, we won't build any dwellings here – we have to move on. If we stop we grow stale. If we continue forward we grow.

That's the very same danger that we each face in our lives. We see God in these highpoints of life – the birth of a child, a handmade Valentine, the recognition of a distinguished achievement – or any number of experiences – a baptism, a confirmation, a wedding, a family reunion. We want to stop at those points and build permanent places to which we can return again and again.

But what about the other times? Do we see God in what feels like the negative times of our lives? Is God present in the suffering of a young boy with cancer? Is God present when a young wife discovers that her police officer husband has died on duty? Is God available when a plane crashes and people die? Is God in our lives when an earthquake shakes a town on the other side of the world? Is God present when a middle aged man discovers he has AIDS?

These are times of personal suffering and grief and tears. These are the crosses and burdens and weights that we shoulder. We don't want to build permanent dwellings at those points – at the bottom of the mountain. But God really is just as present at the foot of the mountain as at the highest peak. And God is right there

in each of those low times that we might think negative as well as at the high points.

Jesus wants us to understand that if we get hung-up on the high points then we experience only a half-faith. God is available to us in the moments of suffering as well as in the moments of glory. That's the beauty of God. If you stop at the glory points you never experience the low points. If you stop at one place and stay there your faith grows stale instead of growing stronger.

When the disciples tried to freeze the experience on top of that mountain the vision suddenly disappeared. They were given a glimpse of the future but when they tried to hold onto that future, Jesus wouldn't allow it. The disciples had become greedy, trying to keep only the good stuff of faith.

The Transfiguration story comes to us each year on that Sunday prior to the beginning of Lent which begins with Ash Wednesday this week. So here we are again, through Christmas and Epiphany, having made our witness to the birth of Jesus and the coming of God's presence with us. Through the past few weeks we have been given glimpses of the glory of God – miracles, unexpected encounters, challenges to authority. The veil that overshadows the future – the reign of God – is lifted ever so briefly and we see God in God's glorious majesty.

But here we are on the verge of Lent, a time when together we journey into and through the wilderness to discover what's on the other side. During this part of the Christian year we must sink into the depths of Sheol, we must ask the questions that Jesus asked, "How long, O Lord?," "My God, why have you forsaken me?," "Is there a way to take this cup from me? ". We ask the questions and we lean on each other until we get to the point when we experience the greatest suffering ever as we realize that it was we who took Jesus to the cross and nailed him there.

So although we are given hope by being able to glimpse the future – glimpse ever so briefly the dazzling glory of God – stand in the awesomeness brightness of the transfiguration of this child of God named Jesus – we still have to go through the suffering and low points of Lent before the resurrection brings us the truth of God’s victory over the powers of this world. As we journey through Lent, we have that hope of the glory revealed to us in this story. But in the days to come we must first suffer with the knowledge of God’s presence. And in the end we experience the once again – in a more permanent form – God’s glory in resurrection.

During this season of Lent, we must continue to stretch our faith. We must not just stay – we must grow. We can grow through study – everyday on our own if you can commit to a systematic devotional program for the season, Wednesday nights as we gather for soup and art and communion, Thursday nights with others in our continuing prayer and Bible study group. We can grow through practice – I invite you to fast with me as has been my practice, Tuesday nights through Wednesday night when we can break the fast together, put your faith into action this season as we continue to protest gun violence outside Colosimo’s Gun Center on Mondays and Saturdays, reach out to brothers and sisters in need through our Adopt-a-Soldier program. We can grow through worship as we gather here each Sunday morning to celebrate the height of resurrection each Sabbath even in the middle of this low season – worship with your neighbors as we begin Lent with community Ash Wednesday worship at Union UMC this week. Over these next 40 days of Lent we need to grow – not just stay where we are – grow through reflection, prayer, repentance, giving and receiving.

The other option is to simply freeze-frame this moment, put some permanent dwellings, snap some photos, and grow stale instead of grow in faith.

Staying or growing. This is the moment to decide. Let us use Lent to grow.

Amen.