

February 11, 2024
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

*In the Name of the resplendent God of light whom we worship as
Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany, which also makes it the last Sunday before Lent. I think of this as a day when the Church takes a deep breath before stepping into the forty days of Lent. The colors have changed from green to white, and alleluias fill the air. Come Wednesday, everything will look, sound, and feel different.

But today, we have a beautifully strange and wondrous story from Mark's gospel. The telling of Jesus' transfiguration is also recorded in Matthew and Luke, and there's a lot to unpack. To help us with this unpacking, I'm going to propose a decidedly non-biblical phrase, borrowed from the world of real estate: "Location, location, location."

Remembering that physical geography is important to St. Mark, let's begin with the geographic location. Mark tells us that *Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain*. This narrative device would have resonated with Mark's hearers. Mountains were often the setting for God-showings (*theophanies*).

We remember Mt. Sinai (Horeb) or Mt. Carmel. We can also think of the Sermon on the Mount, and the Mount of the Ascension. If a story involves a mountain, we should be paying attention.

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What about the location of the Transfiguration in the storyline of Mark's gospel? For some reason, the editors of the lectionary have trimmed off the first three words of verse 2: *After six days*. What had happened six days before?

You have to turn back to chapter eight to see that six days earlier, while they were in Caesarea Philippi, Peter said to Jesus, *you are the Messiah*, after which Jesus made the first of three predictions of his passion...and resurrection. Now this is important. Remember how Peter tried to talk Jesus out of the suffering bit, for which he got the famous *get thee behind me, Satan* rebuke? It is easy for us to concentrate on the passion part and overlook the resurrection part.

So, we have reached the turning point in Mark's gospel, the crossroads, if you will, on Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem and the Cross. And at this turning point, Peter, James and John are confronted with a transfigured, dazzling, Jesus, who is talking with Moses and Elijah. To borrow words from St. Paul, it is the *light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. On that mountain top, God was giving them – and us – a glimmer of God's glory that is our destination and our destiny. It is a cosmic spoiler alert!

This was a day that changed everything, and at this crossroads, Jesus was preparing the disciples for their new life – a life that would be forever changed. They needed a glimmer of the unrestrained and glorious truth of Jesus' identity so that they could move forward into the uncertain days that lay ahead.

But why, we ask, are Moses and Elijah there? British New Testament scholar Morna Hooker writes, "Like Elijah, Moses functions as a predecessor of Jesus, whose role is to witness to the one who is more than he. It is appropriate, then, that these two witnesses to Jesus should be present on the mountain-top – Elijah whose coming has restored all things, and Moses, whose writings bear witness to Christ."¹

Before we leave the mountain top, let's think about Peter's outburst: *let us make three dwellings*. Countless preachers, this one included, have made much about Peter's impulsiveness, and not always kindly. I am grateful for the more nuanced insight offered by my friend and colleague Rebecca Wright.

"If Jesus is the Messiah, then holding conversation with Moses and Elijah and being commended by the very voice of God is much more "appropriate" than suffering at the hand of the religious folk and being killed by a mob. This is entirely speculation on my part, of course, but it makes as much sense as any of the other reasons I've read explaining Peter's impetuous suggestion. And it fits rather well with what I know of human reactions, ancient and contemporary, to the notion of a suffering Messiah. More: it is not only the Messiah who will suffer, says Jesus, but all who follow in his path. What sane person *wouldn't* rather build a booth on a mountain top than face suffering and even death in the plain below?"²

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Now, having considered the geographical location and the literary location, let's look at the location of this beautifully strange and wondrous account in our own story.

¹ "What Doest Thou Here, Elijah? A Look at St. Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology*. ed. by L. d. Hurst and N. T. Wright. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987, 59-70. p. 69.

² Rebecca Wright, Commentary on Transfiguration, Year B, February 15, 2015.

How might the Transfiguration allow us to meditate on the mystery-laden, sometimes impossible to understand, relationship between suffering and glory, especially as we approach the threshold of Lent?

We've seen how easy it is for Peter, and for us, to hear only the predictions of suffering and death – and not what comes after. We know what we want out of our Messiah, and suffering – his or ours – is not part of that picture. And yet, when we are busy trying to create structures and systems to avoid that suffering, or to close our eyes to it, the voice of God interrupts: *Listen to him!* Listen to him.

This means listening not only to Jesus' words, but also to his life. A life of the Holy coming *down* from the mountaintop, all the way down, down into the depths of your life, your vulnerability, your anxiety, and your dread. In traveling to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the grave, and *through* the grave, Jesus embraces and redeems everything. Everything that is hard, everything that is difficult, even everything that is despicable in life, in order to snatch life from the jaws of death itself!

My dear friends in Christ, the Transfiguration is not so much a story about *our* going *up*, about *our* mountaintop experiences, as wonderful as those experiences are. The story of the Transfiguration is about *Jesus* coming *down*, all the way down, into the depths of our brokenness, our fear, our disappointments, and our loss; embracing and redeeming everything that would keep us from God.

Recall the ancient hymn that Paul cites in his letter to the Church at Philippi – *Though he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God as something to be grasped at. Rather, he took the form of a slave, and emptied himself... &c. (Phil 2).*

This is the core of the Gospel, the Good News, and if we can keep it written on our hearts – IN CAPITAL LETTERS – we might learn to live in hope, knowing that wherever we may go, Christ has already been, and that where Christ is now, we shall one day be.

This gospel reminds us that Jesus is not afraid of what is difficult in our lives. This gospel reminds us that Jesus will not reject us on account of our failings. Jesus' descent back down the mountain reminds us that we do not have to hide the hard parts of our lives from the God we know in Jesus. We don't even have to hide them from ourselves.

For God the Father came to us, in and through the Incarnate Son, precisely to be **with** us and **for** us through thick and thin, through life and death. Indeed, God came in Jesus to be with us through death and into new life, to be "changed into his likeness from glory to glory" as the Collect says.

Jesus the Christ is not seeking out a nice single file line of the pious and the saintly. Instead, he is seeking out the lost, the damaged, the broken, and the suffering;

he is seeking out you and me – seeking to embrace and redeem us all. This is precisely the reason that Jesus was born, lived, suffered, died, and was raised again...that we might know, that we might believe, that God is unrelentingly *for us!*

As you approach the season of Lent, I invite you to join the Church in taking a deep breath. Stuff as many alleluias in your pockets as you can, and listen to the One who came down the mountain – the One who entered the dark places of the world – the One who still seeks to embrace and redeem the dark places of suffering within you.

As you stand at this pre-Lenten crossroad, God has given you a glimpse of your destiny in the Transfigured Christ. Basking in Christ's light, and recalling that he has already embraced and redeemed everything, may you be strengthened to name what is broken and hurting in your own life, and in the world, thereby becoming a little less fearful.

Then, with perseverance and hope, shine the relentless light of God's love on the evils that surround us: evils of prejudice, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and every kind of hatred (the list is long!); unclean spirits that feed on the darkness of fear. Hold up high the *light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*, that you might bring Good News to God's beloved and broken world.

It is good for us to be here. Amen. Alleluia!