

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

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.

REVELATION OVER COFFEE

After Martin Luther King was officially named leader of the civil rights movement, he began to get threats from the Klan. One night he was arrested for going 30 mph in a 25 mph zone and was thrown in Montgomery County jail overnight.

The following day, badly shaken by his experience in the jail, Dr. King wondered if he could take it any more. The phone rang and the voice on the other end threatened to "blow his brains out" and "blow up his house" if he didn't quit leading the movement.

King stared at his coffee and thought about his wife and his newborn daughter, Yolanda. He wondered if he should quit in order to save his family. In a sermon King remembered this moment. He wrote,

“And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep ...

And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any more. I was weak ...

And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it ... I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, ‘Lord I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think that the cause we represent is right.

But, Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage ...

And it seemed at that moment I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’”

Three nights after Martin heard the voice of God over a cup of coffee, the Klan made good on their threat. A bomb exploded on his front porch. It filled the house with smoke and glass but fortunately no one was injured. King took it calmly. He said, “My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it.”

As religious experiences go, hearing the inner voice of God over a cup of coffee seems rather tame. But, that experience gave King the strength he needed to stand up for justice and righteousness. King was able to walk the difficult path that God had set out for him because he got just a tiny glimpse of glory.

King's story reminds me of our lesson for today. High upon a mountain Peter, James and John were given more than just a fleeting glimpse of glory. They saw Jesus transfigured and they heard the very voice of God Almighty speaking from the cloud. God said, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

EMOTION AND SERVICE

If Jesus spoke to us, would we listen? If, over a cup of coffee, we heard a voice of encouragement and a voice of challenge straight from the realm of glory, would we respond by saying with the prophet Isaiah, “Here I am, Lord. Send me?”

Would we?

I hope we would. But, I’m not so sure. Quite often God calls and like Peter we are slow to listen. Like Peter we have our own idea of what would be good.

There are many in our world who wants a glimpse of glory. The most successful religious groups in our country are those who encourage and emphasize religious experience.

People are seeking out a mountaintop experience these days. They want to see Jesus (as the praise and worship song puts it) “high and lifted up.” Go to most of the churches in our area and you see folks with hands raised and hearts wide open.

There’s not a thing in the world wrong with that. Faith is more than just intellectual assent to certain articles of belief. We have a lot to learn from those who are emotional in their worship.

Jesus said that we should love God with our heart, soul, strength and mind. (Luke 10:27) Those words, heart and soul and strength suggest that emotion is supposed to play a big role in worship. If our heart and soul haven’t been touched by God, then we have missed something important. We do need to see God high and lifted up.

But, we need more than emotion to worship God. We also need to listen and follow in the way that Jesus would lead. Sometimes we seek the power and

glory of God's presence, but we are not willing to listen. And we are especially reluctant to hear a truth that might be hard to accept.

We worship with our hearts, minds and soul, but we also worship by going out to do God's will. Jesus said that loving our neighbor is akin to loving God. (Luke 10:27)

Remember the sign that used to be in some of our churches, "Enter to Worship. Depart to Serve?" Maybe we ought to bring that sign back because many of us have forgotten how service to others stands at the very heart of the Christian faith. If we do not serve others in the name of Christ, even the most well planned service of worship (be it modern or traditional) will ring hollow.

Indeed, service in the name of Jesus is worship; service in the name of Jesus is the most profound form of worship.

COMING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

Many of us want to stay on the mountaintop of religious experience. Like Peter, we want to build a shrine or two or three up there on the mountaintop and replicate that wonderful feeling again and again.

The trouble is this. Faith is about more than just having wonderful religious experiences. Faith is about coming down the mountain to serve in the place of need and despair.

I've seen many religious movements come and go in my day. And all of them have one thing in common. They emphasize that moment of religious transformation; they emphasize that moment when a person is changed by God. Just as Jesus was transfigured long ago, they want others to be miraculously changed into Christians by a glimpse of glory.

I want the same thing. But, the trouble with such evangelistic moments is that they sometimes do not help people take the next step on the road to discipleship. They often go no farther than a desire for this initial

transformation. And because of that, many are stunted in their Christian growth, fixated at the beginning point of discipleship.

“Are you saved?” That is the first and only question they ask.

But, if we listen to Jesus, we learn that there is much more to discipleship than a mystical mountaintop experience. If we listen to Jesus we learn that there is much more to discipleship than our own personal safety and salvation.

Indeed, quite often to follow Jesus means to sacrifice our own needs and desires.

If we really listen to Jesus we learn that those who want to be his disciples must pay the price.

They must take up a cross and follow him.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

In the chapter that precedes the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

It’s the turning point of the gospel. And quite dramatically Simon Peter, speaking for the disciples replies in what I have always imagined to be a whisper of hope,

“You are the Messiah.”

Jesus accepts Peter’s statement as fact, but he warns the disciples to tell no one about it. And then Jesus says some things that disciples find hard to accept. He talks about suffering, rejection and death. He would be suffering servant spoken about by the prophet Isaiah.

The disciples don't want to listen to this because they know that if Jesus suffers, they will suffer as well.

And Peter, the impulsive spokesman takes Jesus aside and rebukes Jesus. Peter told Jesus, "Haven't you read the *Power of Positive Thinking*? You need to cut out all this talk about suffering and death. No one will want to follow a Messiah who talks like that!"

And Jesus responds quite forcefully to Peter's rebuke. He rebukes Peter by turning away from him and toward the disciples saying, "Get behind me Satan."

THE PROBLEM WITH SHRINES

I can't imagine a stronger rebuke. But, we see in our lesson for today that Peter and the disciples still do not listen to Jesus when it comes to sacrifice and service. In their fear, they listen instead to their own desires and emotional needs.

And so they try to transform God's glory into something that is more manageable and safe. They transform God's glory into a religious experience that can be localized and contained in a holy shrine.

That's the way it was with Peter. In the face of glory Peter didn't really know what to say (and neither did James and John). In fact the Bible says that the disciples were terrified by what they saw.

But, like so many of us, not knowing what to say didn't keep Peter from talking! Peter talked about capturing that moment for all eternity. Peter wanted to build shrines on the mountain, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.

At this moment Peter's speech is interrupted by God. That great cloud of glory overshadows them, and a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

The God who is revealed in Jesus does not want us to build shrines. The God we serve is much too mobile for a shrine. In Jesus we see that the power and presence of God is always moving on down the road. God is always ahead of us leading us to some new place.

In Jesus we see that the glory of God is quite often found in the valley of human need.

It is an unexpected revelation that can come at any time.

You can't bottle the glory of God in Christ like it is so much spring water. Quite a few would like us to believe that we could bottle glory in this way. We would like to limit the glory of God to the church or to those people who are just like us.

But, it doesn't work that way. The glory of God is much greater than we can even imagine. We cannot bottle it in a shrine or in a way of life.

We can only receive when it comes ... unexpected and overwhelming ... and usually in the form of a human touch.

That's what the disciples learned that on the mountaintop long ago. Jesus was transfigured. Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus. The voice of God spoke from the cloud. But, after they were overshadowed by the presence of God, whom did they see?

GOD'S GLORY IN HUMAN FORM

The Bible tells us that they saw only Jesus, not the transfigured Jesus with the dazzling clothes. No, they saw only the very familiar, very human Jesus who trekked with them up the mountain.

What does this mean?

I believe it means that there is glory in the human touch of Jesus ... and in the human touch of his disciples. There is more to this world you can imagine. And what we need to do is talk less and listen more; what we need to do is listen for the voice of God in the very human voices that surround us.

Someone once said that a good definition of Christian worship is this: "Worship is our risky, faltering attempt to let God be who God is rather than who we might like God to be."

I think that's true, and I also think that this is a difficult thing to do. But, perhaps we could come a bit closer to acceptable worship by realizing that the true glory of God is found not so much on the mountaintop but in the valley of human need below.

Some scholars suggest that we cut off the story of the Transfiguration too soon. They suggest that we should also read about what happens after Jesus goes down the mountain, how he brings healing and hope to those with broken hearts and broken bodies.

In this ministry, in this service to those on the underside of life, we see the true glory of God. It is a glory that is greater than the law and the prophets (represented by Moses and Elijah.) It is a glory that is greater than even the most mystical and powerful of visions.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish theologian said, "God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited... It is not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below... The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below."

I think that God would have us descend from the mountaintop like a life-giving stream. Again I come back to Matthew's gospel and that powerful statement about where we find the presence of Jesus in the world. We find Jesus hidden in the lives of those who have the most need. When we help the least among us, we find presence and glory of Christ. (Matthew 25:40)

The Vietnamese tell a folk tale that is a good way of understanding the glory of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Vietnamese people say that there is only one difference between heaven and hell.

In hell the chopsticks are three feet long and people can't eat. In heaven the chopsticks are also three feet long, but the people feed each other!

The purpose of worship is not to protect us from the world. The purpose of worship is to change the way we live in the world. We want a religion that comforts us rather than challenges us. But, that is not the faith we find when we really listen to Jesus.

Real faith is not about building great temples or shrines. Real faith is about speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten. Real faith is not about transcending life on a high mountain somewhere. Real faith is about transforming life by putting into practice the simple yet difficult teachings of Jesus.

TWINKIES AND ROOT BEER

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six pack of root beer and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old man. He was sitting in the park, just staring at the pigeons. The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old man looked hungry, so he offered him a Twinkie.

The old man gratefully accepted the gift and smiled at the boy. His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer.

Again, he smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old man, and gave him a hug. The old man smiled the biggest smile yet.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

The boy replied, "I had lunch with God. You know what? God's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile the old man returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and he asked, "Dad what did you do today that made you so happy?"

The old man replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God. You know, he's much younger than I expected."

I believe that there is divinity in what seems like the most mundane of events. It is in these very human moments of compassion and joy that God speaks to us. For just an instant, the veil is pulled back, and we see, really see the glory that transforms our lives forever.

Do you have eyes to see and ears to hear the glory of God as revealed in Jesus?

Jesus is God's beloved Son. Listen to him.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN