

Living Light

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Transfiguration Sunday - February 14, 2021

Text: Mark 9:2-9

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Place means something in the Bible. Jesus had journeyed with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, an ancient site sacred to pagans, Greeks, and Roman emperors; there Peter first names him Messiah, and there Jesus begins to warn them of his coming arrest and death, a future Peter flatly rejects. Today's narrative, the story of Jesus' transfiguration, is like a blaze of glory before the suffering to come. Take note of the setting: A mountain. Mountains are places of power and prayer and transformation - of change

Jesus climbs a mountain three times in Mark. The first time, in Chapter 3, after multiple miracles of healing, he goes up a mountain and calls the twelve apostles: "to be with him, to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." He empowers them. The second time, in Chapter 6, after the miracle of feeding 5000 with five loaves and two fish, Jesus orders the disciples to sail to the other side of the lake boat while he goes up the mountain to pray. They run into heavy weather, and he walks over the water to them, frightening them with the power to calm the storm. What you are about to hear is the third time.

Six days after Peter's declaration of Jesus [as Messiah] and Jesus' revelation [of coming events], 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 any more, 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.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. **Thanks be to God.**

I climbed a mountain once. I'd hiked *around* on mountains before, walked on the sides of them and over mountain passes. This time a woman friend challenged me and two other women to climb right to the top of Mt. McLoughlin in southern Oregon. It wasn't the highest one around; you could go up and down in a day. No special equipment needed. We could do it, she insisted.

We started off on a beautiful cloudless day, drove an hour to the parking lot at the trailhead. It was already full of cars. We wouldn't be alone on the mountain. We started to climb.

Here's a funny thing about mountains. As we drove toward the mountain, we could see it clearly, outlined against the sky. Big. (Google it and you'll see it as we did, arriving.) After an hour on the trail we couldn't see the peak, but we couldn't see the parking lot either. The mountain is clear from below, but on your way up, you lose sight of the big picture. You see the trail just in front of you and a whole bunch of trees behind you. You think you're *almost* at the top; then you crest that last little rise, and there's another ridge, challenging you. My body, my feet, seemed to get heavier and heavier. It's a good thing there were four of us; we all *almost* gave up at different times. One of us might pull ahead, then collapse by the side of the trail, done for. Then someone else would catch up and urge her on. People coming down called encouragement, too. The in-between places were the hardest, when we couldn't see the end, when we were sure we'd never make it to the top.

Jesus is at that in-between place in his ministry. So far it's been miracles, miracles, miracles. After this trip up the mountain, it's mostly mayhem. Jesus is changed; he heads straight into trouble: betrayal, arrest, getting killed, rising again. This is the journey Christians trace every single Lent, right up through Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter; we know what happens. The disciples didn't. They couldn't understand Jesus. Even there on the mountaintop, they were still stuck in the middle part of the story where Jesus was doing the miracles that pulled in the crowds, garnered admiration, made them feel important. They couldn't see the trailhead anymore; maybe they'd forgotten the humble beginnings, the fishing jobs they'd come from, and they couldn't understand the dying part. What they did see was impossible: Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus! They freaked out. Terrified. Fear keeps us from seeing the big picture, too.

Then the cloud covered them and they couldn't see anything at all. Mountaintops are supposed to help us see more clearly, but they were blinded - by glory. They heard a voice from the cloud: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." A voice of authority, granting Jesus authority. Empowering him. When they looked, "they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus." Jesus warned them to keep quiet about whatever it is they thought they'd seen until after he'd risen from the dead. As they go back down the mountain, they speculate about this weird death thing that Jesus keeps talking about, and what it means; and what does Elijah have to do with it? Jesus tells them, "John the Baptist *was* the Elijah for our time, and look what happened to him." We know what happened: arrest, imprisonment, death. Suffering.

When they get back to the trailhead, they find the other disciples arguing with scribes, teachers from the temple. At the same time, they are trying and failing to heal a boy with an unclean spirit; his symptoms sound to us like grand mal seizures. The child has suffered all his life, and his family with him. But the disciples don't have the power to heal him. Jesus does. "Why

couldn't we do it?" the disciples ask him privately. "It takes prayer," he says. Maybe he meant less arguing, more faith.

We can't judge the disciples too harshly. We know what comes next; they didn't. They're still stuck in between. And yet, they'll have to take over the ministry when Jesus is gone. There is no one else; Jesus chose them, empowered them back there on another mountain. Now they have to *believe* they can do it. Was it partly for their benefit that Jesus said to the father of the sick child, "All things can be done for the one who believes." Or as my Native American teacher used to say, "Believe, and you will see." What can bring us to this point of believing things can change for the better? Two things: great love and great suffering.

We - and by "we" I mean the whole world - have been through a year of great suffering. A lot of it is happening in isolation, out of sight, but if you don't know, you haven't been paying attention. Maybe we're starting to see the end of covid, but it's like climbing the mountain: one false peak after another. Vaccines are here, but most people have yet to get one. Schools are supposed to re-open, but we're not sure how. We long to worship in person again, but we're not sure when that can happen. Gun sales are up; homicides are up. Domestic violence is on the rise. These are symptoms of fear, distrust, frustration, despair. Narrow, clouded vision. Sometimes it feels as though we're fumbling our way through a collective brain fog, and it's scary. Fear can keep us locked in the familiar, in patterns that don't work anymore.

We're trying to surmount the suffering, and get back to normal. But if we come through this time without being changed, without learning something, without being somehow different people, we'll have missed a great opportunity to grow in our faith and in our service.

Here's the good news: It doesn't matter if we're stuck in the middle; we are where we are, and this is as good a place to start from as any. In fact, it's the *only* place we can start from. So what if we can't see the ending? Above the clouds, the sky is always blue: now is the time for prayer, now is the time to listen for God's voice, asking what comes next, how we can be part of it. Not just getting vaccinated, or getting together for worship, but how we're going to be disciples when those important things *do* happen.

Jesus gave the church the same tools he gave the disciples. And even though Jesus' followers have wandered again and again down false trails, the church has somehow come back again and again to the right path, the one Jesus laid out for us. Jesus equipped each one of us to do exactly what he did: to teach truth, heal bodies and souls, feed multitudes, to bring life and hope and health to the world we know. Not to some other world, some other time. but this world, this time. And not alone. We have each other.

Today we have an incredible opportunity: Mark Neville calls it the Blue Sky conversation and I love that name. Now is the time to pray, to encourage one another, to ask the Holy Spirit to help us believe in what we can't yet see, and to rise above the clouds to look for what God is already doing and imagine together how we can jump on board with it, how we can listen to the Beloved Son who has never left us. We aren't walking alone; we travel in community. We have the witness of those who have been where we're going to assure us we're on the right track. We have everything we need. We just have to claim it.

About Mount McLoughlin? Climbing that mountain was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but we did reach the top, all four of us. We couldn't have done it alone; we needed each other. And the view was worth it. It was glorious, exhilarating! We stayed on the summit for a long time, drinking in the clear blue air, from there to eternity - the living light of Christ with us.

Prayers

God of glory, you speak but we don't always recognize your voice; you show us wonders, but we don't always see them for what they are. Help us follow where you lead and use all the goodness and love you have already equipped us with.

When the way grows hard and our hearts are heavy, fill us with the lightness of your being. May we understand the truth of our times; as sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ may we work together, to see your will is done and your kingdom comes.

When we feel stuck in the "in-between times," let us keep our eyes on the path and do the next right thing. Stir up energy and eagerness in this beloved family of faith to move forward until we do see clearly.

Soften our hearts toward all who suffer: those with covid, those whose livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed in this past year, those who contend for the righteousness of a cause; those who bear the brunt of hatred, and those who carry the poison of hatred within them. Bring us together as your children, as one nation, one world.

May we always remember those who went before us to show us the way: those who helped build this church but are not able to worship with us. Bring healing to loved ones near and far who are in-between times, envisioning a better future but not yet attaining it. We ask your grace and love to surround those who mourn. May they find comfort in you. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who empowers us and taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven...