

THE DAZZLING VISION

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 11, 2018
based on Mark 9:1–8, 30–32; II Peter 1:16–18***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Journey to Jerusalem,” in which we are journeying with the disciples as they travel with Jesus. For the disciples, the journey with Jesus was a spiritual quest in which they were seeking to come to know God’s truth and participate in God’s saving power. Today we arrive at an extraordinary point in their journey—the transfiguration of Jesus. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Through the ages, as people have sought to come to know God, they have often longed for some sort of mountaintop experience—some epiphany, some mystical experience of the reality of God, some illuminating moment when they clearly see who God is and the destiny God has for us. Sometimes people have literally gone to the tops of mountains in their spiritual quest, because a high mountain brings a feeling of spiritual uplift and a sense of the grandeur of God.

Mark chapter nine tells the story of how Jesus took some of his disciples to the top of a mountain. [*Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain Mark 9:2*] He took Peter, James, and John, who were his inner circle. The mountain is not identified in the gospels, but it is traditionally thought to have been Mount Tabor, which is located in southern Galilee. This is not a huge mountain by our standards, but in the region it is a relatively high summit. It has a sharp upward slope which nevertheless is not too severe and could be ascended without mountain climbing equipment. Mount Tabor has been identified as the site of the transfiguration since the third century, and there are several chapels on the slopes commemorating the site. On the other hand, another possibility for the mount of transfiguration is Mount Hermon, at the northern end of Galilee. This is the highest summit in the whole area, and is snow capped in winter. This would have been a hike! In the end, however, it does not matter which mountain it was; what matters is what happened when Jesus and these disciples arrived at the top.

The story in Mark continues, “And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white . . . And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. . . . Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:3–4,7) If the disciples were longing for a mountaintop experience, they had arrived! There is a dazzling vision; there is a voice booming from heaven. This is it! This is the mountaintop experience to exceed all others!

The disciples’ initial reaction was to want to prolong the experience. Mark reports that “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.” (Mark 9:5) He wanted to stay there for a while. Whenever we have an experience of spiritual uplift, we would like to extend it.

Peter also had something else in mind when he suggested that they build three dwellings, for the word he actually uses is the word for tabernacle or booth. Peter was thinking about the feast of tabernacles or booths, an annual festival when the people of Israel would build “booths” or little shelters in which they would camp out, as a way of remembering the wandering of the ancient people of Israel through the wilderness. But what Peter especially had in mind was a prophecy of Zechariah, who had said that when the Messiah comes in glory to become King over all the earth, all the nations would be drawn to worship him with the festival of booths. [*The Lord will become King over all the earth . . . and the nations shall go up to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and shall keep the festival of booths. Zechariah 14:9,16*]

Significantly, just six days before the transfiguration, Jesus had said to the disciples, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” (Mark 9:1) Now on the mountaintop Peter is thinking, “This is it! The kingdom of God is arriving with power. Moses has returned; Elijah, expected to usher in the Messiah, has returned. And Jesus is shining in his true glory. He is about to become King over all the earth; we should start building those booths for that festival!

In other words, Peter was thinking to himself, “I have got this figured out.” He thought he understood how God’s plan was unfolding. There are always people who want to think that they’ve got God figured out. But the gospel of Mark follows Peter’s comment with the wry observation, “He did not know what he was saying.” (Mark 9:6) Or to put it bluntly, he did not know what he was talking about. Mark gives him some leeway by observing, “they were all terrified.” (Mark 9:6) But then the gospel reports two key moments.

First, the voice from cloud booms out, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) Peter had actually not been doing a very good job of that. In the previous chapter, there is an account of how Jesus had said that he must suffer and die; but Peter had refused to listen to such talk, insisting that suffering sacrifice was not the Messiah’s destiny. Now the voice from the cloud makes clear to Peter that he does not know what he is talking about, he does not know God’s plan; he needs to listen to Jesus.

There is a clear message here for all of us. We can come up with all sorts of ideas about God and how we think God ought to work. But if we want to get the real picture, we need to look to Jesus, and listen to Jesus, because Jesus is God’s revelation to us.

The next thing that happens is that Moses and Elijah disappear. The mountaintop experience does not linger. The disciples must head back down the mountain; and when they do, Jesus begins talking again about suffering and death and resurrection. [*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*” Mark 9:31]

What is especially notable at this moment is where the disciples now are in their spiritual understanding and faith. Mark reports. “They did not understand what Jesus was saying and were afraid to ask him.” (Mark 9:32)

They had just had the quintessential mountaintop experience—the dazzling vision, the voice from heaven! And now they were just as spiritually dense, just as unclear, and just as afraid as they were before. Maybe a mountaintop experience is not actually the way to come to know God.

Why do three of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tell the story of the transfiguration? On one level, this account certainly is a testimony to the identity of Jesus. There is a striking parallel between the story of the transfiguration and the story of Moses receiving the ten commandments on Mount Sinai. Both events happen on a mountaintop. On Mt. Sinai, it is said that Moses’ face shone after speaking with God [*Coming down from Mt. Sinai . . . Moses’ face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. Exodus 34:29*]; and on the mount of the transfiguration, Jesus’ garments shine with the radiance of God’s glory. On Mt. Sinai, there is a cloud over the mountain signifying God’s presence, and the same thing happens on the mount of transfiguration. Moses is literally present on both mountains, but now on the mount of transfiguration the voice of God directs all attention to Jesus. The whole event demonstrates plainly that Jesus is the culmination of what God has been doing since Moses, that Jesus is now the perfect revelation of God’s will and God’s purpose for humanity. And it is absolutely clear that Jesus is the Son of God. As Peter would later say in his second letter, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son . . .” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (II Peter 1:16–18)

So the Transfiguration is an important event that serves to establish who Jesus is. But the Transfiguration story in the gospels also serves to make clear how we come to truly know Jesus and understand God’s purpose for our own lives. A mountaintop experience, even one as spectacular as the one on the mount of transfiguration, will likely be inadequate. It was only in hindsight, writing much later in his second letter, that Peter was able to make full sense out of what happened on that mountain. At the time, right after the Transfiguration, Peter and the others were as confused as ever. They needed something else to be able to comprehend God’s truth and connect with God’s purpose.

Here it is highly significant that right before the Transfiguration and right after the Transfiguration, Jesus talked about his coming suffering and how he would give himself for humanity. The disciples could not make sense out of it at the time, because they thought that the Messiah was supposed to come to crush the wicked and to rule in glory. But as they continued to journey with Jesus on the road to Calvary—through his suffering and his crucifixion, and then the resurrection and Jesus’ commission to them to take his

message to the world—they finally understood that Jesus had come to save the sinner and to give his life for others.

In short, the disciples came to understand God's truth and God's purpose for their lives *as they followed Jesus in his way of self-giving service for others*. This is the reason that their whole journey with Jesus had begun with Jesus' words, "Follow me!" We come to spiritual understanding and transformation as we actually walk with Jesus and join in his kind of service to the world. It is tempting to think that all we need is to get to the mountaintop somehow, to arrive at some high moment of spiritual enlightenment. But what we really need is to journey with Jesus and share in his outreach of love for humanity. This is why in our church we put such emphasis on being in mission in our community and world, because this is how we authentically connect with the Spirit of Jesus.

Most of the disciples were not even invited to go up to the mount of transfiguration, which is a very clear statement that the mountaintop experience is not necessary for genuine discipleship. What they were all invited to do was to follow Jesus in faithful servanthood. As they did so, they would not attain the kind of glory and power that they had originally imagined, but they would ultimately find their real purpose and eternal future in Christ. In the end, they discovered that the place to come into connection with God is not the mountain but the cross. It is in the cross of Jesus that we are reconciled with God, and it is by sharing in that self-giving compassion of Jesus that we discover the real power of God and our real calling as God's people.

Thomas Troeger, a professor of preaching now at Yale Divinity School, wrote a meditative poem on the transfiguration, which he set to music in a hymn (*Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory*). It encapsulates well what we have considered this morning –

Swiftly pass the clouds of glory, Heaven's voice, the dazzling light;
 Moses and Elijah vanish; Christ alone commands the height!
 Peter, James, and John fall silent, Turning from the summit's rise
 Downward toward the shadowed valley Where their Lord has fixed His eyes.
 Glimpsed and gone the revelation, They shall gain and keep its truth,
 Not by building on the mountain Any shrine or sacred booth,
 But by following the Savior Through the valley to the cross
 And by testing faith's resilience Through betrayal, pain, and loss.
 Lord, transfigure our perception With the purest light that shines,
 And recast our life's intentions To the shape of Your designs,
 Till we seek no other glory Than what lies past Calvary's hill
 And our living and our dying And our rising by Your will.