



Transfiguration of the Lord

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Mark 9:2-9

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“Change”

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, 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. ⁵Then 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.

There are moments in our lives that change everything. They change the way that we perceive things. They change the way that we value things. They change the way that we understand ourselves: who we are and the meaning of our individual lives. Fifteen years ago, I became violently ill, and in the midst of that illness, I realized that most of my attention and time was given to things that don’t ultimately matter, and the things that did, I rarely gave any time or energy, believing that there would always be time “later”. Suddenly I realized, there may not be “later.” These are *transfiguring* moments. They change everything.

When they occur in our lives, integrity calls us to travel a different path, and often we are not understood. But in the words of the poet Robert Frost, that road less taken “has made all the difference.” Discipleship is choosing the road less taken. Often it takes a transfiguring moment for us to see that road.

I

Jesus, Peter, James and John ascended the mountain to pray. There on that mountaintop things changed. The appearance of Jesus changed. Suddenly he was seen with Elijah and with Moses. Once again the voice of God affirmed Jesus' vocation: "This is my Son!" Then suddenly the light stopped, the voice silenced and they were left alone. But it changed everything.

Things were never returned to the way they were. Today we call this passage "the Transfiguration." Jesus was literally transfigured in the presence of the three disciples. But the significant change was not in his appearance. No. It was what happened afterward. It happened as they began the descent from the top of the mountain: They did not return to Capernaum where they had lived and labored for nearly three years. No. Jesus made the decision to go to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, the center of the Hebrew faith. There in Jerusalem he would encounter the principalities and powers of this world. There he would be crucified.

The gospel has a more urgent tone following the transfiguration. If we look at this as a drama, (and it is very dramatic!). It would be the turning point. Nothing will be the same after this event. In short: Jesus had a vision of his mission, and now the gospel story moved toward the fulfillment of that vision.

There is one peculiar part to this story. There on the mountain top, Peter wanted to build booths or monuments. I don't know what motivated him, but would guess that he wanted to capture that moment forever. He wanted to be able to live in that moment... never having to descend from that mountain top experience. That was a temptation for Peter. It is for us also!

Life changing moments soon resolve into the ordinary. We can't stay in the moment forever. We have to descend from the mountain. We have work to do. We have a mission to complete. Peter wanted to freeze the moment forever, but Jesus stopped him. Everything was heading toward Jerusalem... toward the cross.

II

There are mountain top experiences in individual lives. These are the moments when we envision what our lives are about. These are moments when we can see, literally see, what we are supposed to be doing with our lives. These are the transfiguring moments that change everything. They occur in the lives of historic individuals. Martin Luther King, on the night before he was assassinated preached these words: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind."

They also occur in the lives of ordinary people like you and me. A number of years ago I spent some time with a mixed group, different ages, different experiences, and we looked at the story of the transfiguration in terms of our lives. . One of the teenagers in the group shared her experience at a church summer camp. While she was there she had an experience of what she described as "sudden knowledge." "I knew from that moment I would do something for God. My life was inexorably tied to some type of ministry. I don't think I have a choice."

Another individual shared about the death of his father and how in the course of his grief he realized that his life was called to a new direction. "You must change" he said, there seems to be no choice." Most importantly, he added, "When these moments occur, you need to listen." These are the events that change everything.

From my own life I have experienced such a moment. Many of you are aware that my father was also a clergyman. He was a brilliant preacher, a professor of preaching for ten years. When I first started preaching regularly, I would send my father a copy of my weekly sermon. Like any son or daughter, I was looking for some approval and encouragement: "Atta boy". They would always come back corrected, with green ink all over them. I don't know if my father had it in him to give me that encouragement, but he gave me what he had, and I took it to heart. But, I always felt that I could not measure up to him. I was not good enough.

When he died, he left instructions that I should preach his funeral service, which I did, and that should have been enough, but I still struggled with my calling, wondering if I was pursuing only to please my now deceased father. Then one night I had a dream. I was sitting on the steps of a church, depressed because I could not find my sermon manuscript. I was stuck. Then my father appeared and said to me. "It is ok. You can preach."

I am sure the Freudian analysts could have a field day with that dream, but it was, for me, a transfiguring moment in my call as a preacher/pastor. My calling as a pastor/preacher became my own. The road to Jerusalem was clearly before me. I was called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ for God's people... not to gain my father's approval.... I had his approval all along.

These transfiguring moments can be exciting. They can be traumatic. They can occur in dreams. They can be quiet and meditative. But to the human spirit they are like a light show! We gain an insight into who we are, what our history means, and what God is calling us to do.

III

Do these moments occur in the life of a church? Yes, without a doubt!

What were the moments that were transfiguring in the life of Poland Presbyterian Church? What were the moments when the mission that God has given to this community of faith became crystal clear, or in the words of Mark, "dazzling" in its clarity and "blinding" in its truth? Was it a sermon that has never been forgotten? A Sunday, perhaps like today, when the weather gives everyone an excuse to stay home, but some say: "this is my home... worshipping with sisters and brothers in Christ." Was a time of trauma or conflict, when values clashed and choices had to be made? I truly believe that these are the moments when God gives us an insight into who we are, and what He is calling us to do.

They are moments when we have clarity, a vision if you will, about who we are, and what we are called to do in the community and the world. These are mountaintop experiences and they have a way of being branded upon our souls. These are the authentic moments of vision in the life of the congregation...and they change everything.

Let me conclude with a challenge. I perceive my ministry as one which leads this congregation, Poland Presbyterian Church, into the awesome future that God has planned.. My challenge is that we pay attention to these transfiguring moments, and listen to what they have to say to us. My challenge is that we allow ourselves to think bigger than we have.

The temptation is to be controlled by our fears (and our fears are legion)... We can worry about what we don't have, be it money, or volunteers or whatever. Or we can respond to our hopes: indeed the vision God has placed in our hearts. Remember: a few loaves and fish in the hands of disciples feeds many. God will multiply grace in our midst if we are faithful. We will have all that we need... to do what we are called to do.

As we continue to move forward in history, I ask for your prayers. I ask that you learn to forgive the mistakes and blunders that we will make, recognizing that history will forgive them. I ask that we join together, recognizing that Poland Presbyterian Church's history is not something that is in the distant past. What we do and who we serve today is tomorrow's history. Together, let us journey with Christ to Jerusalem. Amen.