

Mark 9: 2-9 Mountaintop Visions

This is Transfiguration Sunday on the church calendar and we just read the account of this experience from the gospel of Mark. This trip up the mountain with the three disciples who were considered to be closest to Jesus is found in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The gospel of John does not mention this event at all but in John's gospel Jesus' divinity is more pronounced and visible throughout the narrative. In his portrayal of Jesus, the living Word, the humanity was harder to detect than the divinity. Since this mountaintop experience is present in all three of the other traditions, it was clearly something that was of great importance to the early church. But what are we to understand as its meaning for us this morning? What do we make of the radiance of Jesus' garments or the appearance of Moses and Elijah? First of all, although transfigure is not a word that we are likely to encounter in our usual conversations, it is indeed a word found in a regular dictionary. In the dictionary under the entry for transfiguration, it is defined as being this change in Jesus' appearance as described in the Bible or the church festival based on the event. But the verb to transfigure is listed separately. It is described in more general terms as being to change the figure or outward appearance of something. To transform is given as a synonym. In the Greek text the meaning is the same. Like our translation it is found in the passive sense and means to be changed in form or transformed. The scene described seems to be one fit for the big screen of Hollywood. It involves extraordinary events with incredible special effects and appearance of miraculous figures from the past. These three disciples, Peter and James and John, form an inner circle around Jesus. Just six days before Jesus had questioned the disciples asking, "Who do people say that I am?" He receives several answers. Then Jesus asks them, "But who do **you** say I am?" Peter responds with the correct answer, the answer we already know, "You are the Messiah." It however is clear that Peter doesn't really understand what this is going to mean. Because when Jesus then begins to teach them about the suffering and death which is to come, Peter says that this fate must be avoided. It cannot happen. And Jesus rebukes him. I am not sure who found this more distressing Jesus that Peter did not understand or Peter that he was rebuked by the one he was following. It is about a week after this interaction that we are told that Jesus takes the three inner circle disciples up to the top of a mountain leaving the other disciples behind. Jesus often sought high places for prayer. This is not what Mark tells us, but it is included in Matthew. When they got to the mountaintop Mark simply says: "And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." I once heard that someone in a Bible study after reading this verse exclaimed that they didn't know the Israelites had bleach. In fact, I am not sure that they did as we understand it because the Greek literally just says that no one on earth was able to whiten something like that. His garments were shining, radiant. But that is beside the point, except it illustrates that we often focus on details. What we learn is that this man Jesus with whom they have been traveling the countryside suddenly has a very different outward appearance. The text doesn't say that Jesus changed anything about himself, but that his appearance was changed in the disciples' eyes. And to top off that startling event, the disciples suddenly see two other men talking with Jesus. They are on the top of this mountain just the four of them; Jesus is suddenly changed and two others appear. No wonder the text tells us they were

terrified. Some modern approaches to this scene say that Jesus' appearance didn't really change, but that the disciples suddenly saw Jesus differently. If the order of events were different; that is, if Moses and Elijah had appeared before Jesus' appearance changed, I might agree. But that is not the order of events we are given in the text. And the order is the same in all of the narratives about the experience. There are also several reasons given by scholars about the placement of this mountaintop experience. For some, it provides to Peter and the others the proof of Jesus' identity as Messiah and foreshadows the resurrection. Moses and Elijah were prophets of God who did not die according to the Hebrew Scriptures. They were taken directly to be with God and their bodies were never found. The story of Elijah disappearing in the chariot of fire which was our Hebrew Scripture this morning reminds us of this. Elijah suddenly is there with Jesus walking and talking, although what is being said is not revealed. Some interpreters feel that this was a type of pep talk for Jesus as his time of trial is drawing near. Yet although it seems clear that this is the point at which Jesus begins the move toward Jerusalem, we are still in the middle of his ministry. It is sometimes seen as being another confirmation by God that Jesus is his beloved son as the voice from the cloud repeats what was said at his baptism. Since these disciples were not at that event, we can understand this being a type of official notice that Peter's declaration was correct. But there is a short phrase added to the declaration. They are told: "Listen to him." This command could be there because it is at this point that Jesus has just begun to try to teach the disciples what being God's Messiah truly meant and it was something they did not want to hear. Despite the vision they had seen of Moses and Elijah talking to this Jesus who had become radiant, the voice they heard did not tell the disciples to look at Jesus to see his divinity. Instead, the command was to listen to him. We live in an age where computer generated special effects are abundant in movies, on television, in the games played on computers. I think that when we come to this passage it is very easy to get distracted by all those things which would look so spectacular if technology was used to visualize them for us or the use of the word *bleach* in a translation. We have a tendency to look at them with a critical eye trying to rationalize them. I think that an important aspect of this passage is just the fact that it doesn't easily fit into our logical approach to everything. It is mysterious. It is not something that we can explain with our theories. The truth is, God is mysterious. And really God is mysterious even when science can offer explanations. I would like to make the point that God is intentionally mysterious. Jesus tells the disciples to keep their experience a secret. God is purposefully mysterious, keeping secrets and refusing to let us know everything. That we are not to know everything about God is revealed very early in the story of our relationship with God. Adam and Eve were given all that they needed in the Garden of Eden, but were commanded to stay away from one tree: the tree of **knowledge** of good and evil. There is something that is not theirs but belongs only to God. There are other examples embedded in the scriptures where God acts to reveal some things but remains mysterious. We are not meant to solve the mystery that is God, but we are called to be in **relationship** with the mystery. There is a limit to what we can know about God, surely, but the true nature of God's love and grace has been shown to us in Jesus Christ. His love is obvious, his grace tangible, his mercy unmovable and unchanging. Our God is purposefully mysterious, but in the most intimate of ways, God has made Godself known to us in the person of Jesus. The transfiguration story, although miraculous and mysterious, reveals

to us that Jesus is the beloved son, the beloved son who has come to make God's mysterious love known to us. In a few minutes we will gather around the Table that Jesus provides, receive the gifts of bread and juice and share in the communion experience with one another. This sacrament is one of the holiest mysteries of the church; theologians throughout history have spilled a lot of ink trying to define what exactly happens in the sacrament of communion. But truly, what happens is a mystery, a holy mystery. Let us in awe and wonder accept the revelations of love and grace given to us through the mountaintop vision of the transfiguration thanking God for that blessing. Amen.