

A Transformative Experience

2Kings 2:1-13 Mark 9:2-9

We are journeying with Jesus through Mark's gospel, which is also a journey through the season of Lent these next few weeks, as Jesus and his disciples make their way to Jerusalem.

The context of this passage I'm about to read is important, to know what happens right before: In a teachable moment, Jesus asks his followers, "Who do you say that I am?" to which Peter replies "You are the Christ/Messiah." Then, Jesus tells them that when they get to Jerusalem he will be handed over to the authorities, and will be killed. Peter doesn't like this and lets Jesus know it; the gospel writers tell us that Peter actually rebukes Jesus. That's pretty bold!

In response, Jesus tells Peter that he has his mind on the wrong things, and then he issues his famous call to discipleship, which is a classic Lenten text: "If anyone wants to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me; for whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

Here is where we pick up the story...

Mark 9:2-9

²Six 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, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And 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." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹As 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Science teachers never tire, I'm told, of the moment when a student first looks into a microscope. What up until then had seemed like a boring glob of dirt, or perhaps an ordinary leaf, can suddenly become full of pattern, color, and living organisms. That student will never see things the same way again; everything now has more interest and potential than before. The same thing happens with a telescope—when you see Saturn's rings for the first time with your own eyes; or Jupiter's moons, or our moon on a clear night.

For Peter, James and John, what began as a more or less ordinary day, became extraordinary for a moment of time. A hike up a mountainside to take a

break, an ordinary experience with Jesus, became an extra-ordinary experience that made a deep impact. They will never see Jesus the same way again, and perhaps all of life won't be seen the same way again. In fact, Peter speaks about this specific experience in one of his letters in the New Testament, so this experience had special significance for him. I'll read that passage in a moment.

And as I put on my Bible detective hat and, with curiosity, read this account—in Mark, but also in Matthew and Luke—I am drawn to the question(s): Why did this take place? Or, why did it *need* to? What is the significance of this transfiguration—for the disciples, and for us?

I'd like to reflect on two significant aspects of this experience. Both of them having to do with connecting dots. Connections that affirm and strengthen faith.

First, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, specifically, connect the dots from Old Testament to New Testament, so to speak, by affirming that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God had promised through the law and the prophets.

At the very beginning of Jesus' teaching ministry, in Matthew's gospel, at the beginning of what is called the sermon on the mount (Matt.5-7) Jesus says these words, "*I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.*" I have not come to *abolish* the law and the prophets, but to *fulfill* them.

Now, on the mount of transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appear, Moses represents the law; and Elijah represents the prophets, both of which point to Jesus as the fulfillment of what the law and the prophets intended.

The appearance of these two towering Old Testament figures tells us that Jesus is the culmination of the centuries-long story of God's redemptive plan and purposes. It tells us that Jesus did not come to start a brand-new religion; he didn't appear out of the blue and start teaching completely new material. He came to reveal the heart of what God had been saying and purposing all along through the law and the prophets, and to complete them; to fulfill their intent.

Moses and the law got things started in shaping and forming a people who would be distinct and unique as God's own people, from deliverance out of Egypt to the promised land. *Elijah and the prophets* carried things forward in working to remind God's people who they were—mainly, that they were to be a light to the world, witnessing to God's grace and love and, to quote the prophet Micah, "To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." The prophet's work was to continuously call the people back to that identity and to prepare the way for God's messiah.

And so the presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain confirm that Jesus had come to complete what the law and the prophets began.

Paraphrased note: Mark tells us that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus; but he doesn't tell us what they were talking about. Luke, however, fills that in, and says that Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus *about his departure*—which meant, his eventual death in Jerusalem as part of God's redemptive purpose. What's *that* conversation all about? They weren't telling him something he didn't already know ("*Hey, guess what? You're going to go to Jerusalem and be murdered by the authorities. Good luck!*") Because just before this, Jesus had told his disciples that they were on their way to Jerusalem, and while there he would be handed over to the authorities, killed, and that he would rise on the third day. So, he already knew what was coming. So why did Moses and Elijah talk with him about this? Did he need a boost of encouragement from them? I doubt it. No, they spoke about it because this entire transfiguration experience wasn't for Jesus' sake. It was for Peter, James and John to see and overhear and experience, so that they would be strengthened in their faith. And they would, in time, then spread the word to others.

Here is another interesting piece: Peter, James, and John, because of their Jewish heritage, in seeing *Moses and Elijah in particular* on the mountain, would have known that of all the heroes of their Jewish faith and heritage, Moses and Elijah were the only two that disappeared from view without having died in the

normal way. Moses died, it tells us at the end of Deuteronomy, but his body just seemed to disappear. There is no mention of a burial or of his bones being taken somewhere, or of anyone being with him at the time of his death—thus, there are no shrines to Moses in the middle east, where his bones or burial site lay. Today, we have David's tomb, Joseph's bones, Jacob's well, and so forth, but nothing for Moses. All it says (in Deut.24) was that he ascended mount Nebo because he knew it was his time, and he went away.

And of course, we just heard about Elijah's spectacular departure. Swing low, sweet chariot, right?! Off he goes, in the OT version of Elon Musk's rocket into outer space carrying a red Tesla convertible. His body never returned.

Elijah's, that is.

So, not only are Moses and Elijah revealing of the continuity of old and new covenant that Jesus came to fulfill, in them is a foretaste of Jesus' departure as well. A little pre-resurrection, pre-ascension moment; a portent of the kind of departure that Jesus himself would experience, particularly in his ascension, so that the disciples would be strengthened in faith.

So, the first significance of this experience is to reveal that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and as part of that fulfillment, to give a

glimpse of what is to come in Jerusalem, and afterward. And all of this tells us, once again, that God keeps promises.

This transfiguration is significant, second, because the disciples needed to have an “Oh my gosh!” “Holy cow!” experience, to encourage and solidify their growing faith that Jesus is who he says he is, and *who they just confessed him to be*. Because, again, in all three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), if we go back just a few verses, Jesus asks all of the disciples the question: Who do you say that I am? And Peter, speaking on behalf of the group, says “You are the Christ; God’s messiah.” That is a verbal, intellectual confession if you will, and it’s right on. But the intellectual and verbal confession isn’t enough. Dots need to be connected from the intellectual and confessional, to the *experiential*. Those are the other dots that are connected in this transfiguration experience: the intellectual to the experiential.

Both are needed. We’ve placed a lot of emphasis, since the Enlightenment of the 18th century, on the intellectual, and on the confessions of faith—in the Presbyterian Church we have an entire book called *The Book of Confessions* which contains all the creeds of the church since the 4th century. Great. They’re needed. But we also need the experiential, the importance of connecting head

with heart, and with experience of the transcendent. Which is what this transfiguration experience did for the disciples.

Again, this was not for Jesus. It was for the *disciples*, so their faith can be strengthened in who they just confessed Jesus to be. And this strengthening happens in a couple ways on the mountain:

One, God *glorifies* Jesus in that moment. The brightness, the shining, is revealing his divinity, showing his glory. In this moment Jesus was *glorified* by God. And it was meant to inspire awe and wonder and faith. I don't want to try to explain the brightness of the vision too much, because visions like this, when they happen, are simply to be taken in and delighted in, and to be inspired by. When you and I have these kinds of experiences, it's important that we don't overthink it. Rather than trying to figure it out, we just need to be in awe, and be encouraged by it.

Because this is a mystical moment. This is a thin place, or thin space experience. Have you heard that term before? It's a wonderful word picture. A thin space where the distance between heaven and earth, or as the ancient Celtic Christians would say, the membrane between this world and the otherworld, becomes thin. Or, we might say the veil is pulled aside for a moment, so we can be amazed and encouraged and strengthened. Sometimes it's a specific place

where this seems to happen more often; sometimes it's just an experience we are given as a gift, wherever we find ourselves.

This is spoken of in Celtic literature and lore, and you and I know it occasionally from our own experience. You just have a sense of the divine, of God's glory breaking through in an unusual, extraordinary way. That's part of what's going on here, as Jesus takes them aside to have an experience that's out of the ordinary; it breaks the routine and gives them an awesome and adventurous moment of faith.

This happened to someone in a Sunday church service years ago where I was serving, where in the middle of an ordinary Presbyterian worship service a woman had an extraordinary spiritual experience where everything shone brightly (not as brightly as Jesus' garments; she described it as a kind of shimmering beauty), she felt a warmth and a joy and peace like never before, and the music and prayers were magnified and accentuated in a way that sounded otherworldly. As she reflected on that experience later, she kind of joked about it and said", I guess God did something that wasn't listed in the order of service!" God showed up at church! In a unique way. Yet it can happen—and does happen—anywhere.

So, the disciples' faith (our faith) is strengthened by the thin space experience, a glorification of what is seen/perceived with the eyes. A brightness.

Their faith is strengthened, second, by the *voice* that comes from a cloud that now overshadows them. Just a brief pause here to observe that this experience moves from brightness and clarity, to foggy mystery. Jesus, in all his glory, is seen with Moses and Elijah. That dazzling and clear experience then gives way to a shroud of mystery. Again, I don't want to try to explain this, except to say, wow!

And the words the disciples hear out of the cloud are the same words, *almost* identical to what was said at Jesus' baptism. Except this time the words are spoken, not to Jesus directly, but to Peter, James and John, who are experiencing this. God says, "*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*" Jesus heard words almost identical to this at his baptism, to have his identity spoken over him, to strengthen him for what would lie ahead, for him. God said: "*You are my son, my beloved.*" Now, these words are spoken, again, to the *disciples* ("*This is my son; the beloved; listen to him*"), so they will have confirmed *to them* who Jesus is, and so *they* can be strengthened for what lies ahead, *for them*. Because it isn't going to be easy after this, we'll see.

Listen to how Peter himself explains this (2Peter 1:16-18): "*...for we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I*

am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” Peter’s next line is: “*So, we have the message more fully confirmed...*” This transfiguration experience helped confirm Peter’s faith, and now he is in turn encouraging the confirmation of faith in God’s people.

In pulling this all together, I find, in this transfiguration account, an invitation to join Peter, James and John on the mountain. We all benefit from these kinds of experiences with Jesus—something out of the ordinary, something that grabs our attention and dazzles us for a moment in time. We need “thin place” experiences like this to strengthen us and confirm our faith.

Amidst the clamor and noise of distraction and shiny objects calling for our attention, the stress, and the political rancor, we need to be invited to come away with Jesus, up the mountain if you will, for an experience that strengthens us, and gives us a glimpse of a bigger picture—or a deeper picture—of who Jesus is, which causes our jaw to drop occasionally. And we *need* to be encouraged and strengthened for our journey, because life isn’t always easy; and we need to be reminded that God is real, and that Jesus is present with us.

It doesn’t have to be this spectacular, with dazzling white garments, ghosts of people past, and otherworldly voices. It can happen in a moment when time

stands still for us, and everything seems to fall away except a focused, present awareness of God's love for you, and the greatness of God, which brings extraordinary comfort and peace.

And it can happen anywhere, anytime. On a mountainside (literally), in a church service, listening to beautiful music, playing with your children or grandchildren, lying awake in the middle of the night, on a retreat (like we often have "mountaintop" experiences on retreats); it can happen while working in your garden, or while cooking dinner.

And these experiences come to us as a gift, usually unexpectedly. They are experiences we are invited into... like Peter, James and John were *invited* to come along, up the mountainside. They didn't manufacture this experience; it was unexpected, and a little startling, but obviously welcomed. These experiences are a gift, for our encouragement.

And when these gifts of thin space experiences are given—whether they are spectacular or subtle, big or small—as wonderful as they are when we experience them, we have to come down from the mountain eventually.

Peter, James and John had to come down from the mountain following their thin space moment. And eventually *we* have to come down from the mountain as well. Because when we have these experiences, even in small ways,

we are often tempted to want to hang onto them. To stay up on the mountain, so to speak. Peter faces that temptation.

Peter is so taken by this ecstatic experience, and by Moses and Elijah showing up, that he offers to build shelters for everyone. Let's call up HGTV and have them build tiny houses for you all. That's his initial response. And given Peter's propensity for avoiding the difficult path (remember, he rebuked Jesus for saying that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem), we can look at this bright idea that Peter has—to build shelters for this little mountaintop party—as a desire to stay, to remain in this exhilaration, in this moment of glory. Who *wouldn't* want to!? What a wonderful experience! When I see a magnificent sunset, I want that sunset to stay there for an hour or two. I want the cool bird I'm looking at to hang out and not fly away.

But, we have to come down from the mountain after heart-warming or spectacular experiences. With gratitude, and strength for the journey ahead. Because we live down-to-earth lives, in a world that is sometimes messy, and where the journey is sometimes difficult.

After coming down from the mountain Jesus will, again, remind his disciples of why he came. Two more times after this he will tell them of his upcoming suffering and death once they get to Jerusalem. But instead of resisting that

message, like Peter initially did, they can now accept it with renewed trust that this is the right and necessary road, and that, in the end, all will be well.

#193, Jesus Take Us to the Mountain