

“Up on the Mountain”
Mark 9: 2-8
Transfiguration Sunday-Feb. 19, 2011
CCUMC
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Before scripture

In this season of Epiphany I’ve been preaching on the lectionary texts from the gospel of Mark. We’ve moved from Jesus’ baptism, to his calling of the fisher folk who made up his first disciples, and then to his dynamic ministry of preaching the good news and healing. Now, on this Transfiguration Sunday—the last Sunday of Epiphany—we make a leap to the top of a mountain. In our jump to today’s reading, we’ve skipped over Jesus’ feeding of the four thousand and teaching on discipleship—to take up the cross to follow him. This text for today then, of Jesus’ turning to dazzling white on a mountain top, serves as a hinge. Today’s scripture transitions us from Epiphany’s stories of the gradual revelation of the power and presence of the good news in Jesus to Lent’s steady journey to the cross. The transfiguration story anchors our lives in Christ’s identity as the son of God, so that we too can walk with Jesus into our own deaths and resurrection. The one who calls us to follow him leads us into a deep discipleship that involves nothing less than our own transformation.¹

Scripture Reading

I. Hiking Up A Mountain

To see the majesty of many of the 14ers that stand guard above our valley, you have to take a hike up a mountain. The effort involved for a vista in our valley sets us apart from places like the Rocky Mountain National Park, where you can literally drive across the mountain ridges for spectacular views. In our valley, you’ve got to do some

¹ Peter Berge, “The Beginning of the Good News,” *Word and World*, vol. 17, no. 1 Winter 1997.

moving. Sure, Mt. Sopris spreads out her glorious skirts of trees and snow for us all to see. Sure, you can drive up to the Bells with all the rest of the tourists. Yet, the other peaks in the Elk Range—Capitol, Pyramid, Snowmass Peak/Mtn, Cathedral, cloak their grandeur behind the foothills of the Roaring Fork valley. You've got to put on some hiking shoes, grab some water and energy bars, and get out on a trail to experience their grandeur upclose. You've got to get up on a mountain to really see the beauty that is all around us.

I kind of like that you have to give forth some strenuous effort in order to really experience the mountains around us. I like the grandiose surprise I receive when hiking a trail like West Snowmass, going through a glade of trees and then emerging to a stunning view of Capital in all her rugged, jagged beauty. The process itself of working hard to get higher changes you. Down at the trailhead, you're still consumed with what you've left behind—unattended to details of life and work. Then you get consumed with getting all your gear on. When you first launch off hiking, you chat a lot with your companions, your kid in the backpack wants a stick or a rock to hold, your feet haven't yet settled into a rhythm. After some time, maybe an hour or so, everyone settles into the rhythm of creation. You don't talk as much, the hike goes more uphill, and hopefully the kid in the backpack has settled into a nap. You are no longer thinking about undone work; instead the clean air and mountain meadows open your spirit. As your feet pound a steady rhythm on the path and your heart pounds with exertion, a peace as beautiful as the vistas around you settles over you. You're different than you were down in the valley. Up on the mountain you see differently. You see the splendor hidden from you in the valley. You see your life in a different light. Up on the mountain you feel more holy—you can almost touch God.

II. Jesus up on a mountain

Perhaps the deeply spiritual quality of mountains explains why throughout the Old and New Testament humans go up on mountains to touch the divine. In the book of Exodus (34:2) Moses goes up on a mountain to talk with God and to receive the ten commandments. When he comes down his face shines so bright with God's glory that people are afraid. In our text today, Jesus goes up on a mountain and he shines so bright that his disciples are afraid. Up on a mountain Jesus doesn't look like the dusty traveling prophet. He seems like he is touching God. Up on a mountain, Jesus seems different, holy even.

The actual Greek word for "being made different" in our text today is *metamorpho*. The English word "metamorphosis" derives from this word. It means "to be transformed"; a common example would be the change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. *Metamorpho* is rendered in Latin is "trans figura" or to change form, from which we get "transfiguration." In whatever language, what happened to Jesus up on that mountain made him look different to his disciples.

Peter, James, and John found this metamorphosis of their guy from Nazareth not to be glorious or full of splendor—but instead terrifying and deeply confusing. Maybe some of you feel that way in hearing this story of dazzling white clothes—it's confusing, surreal, and a little frightening. Peter was so frightened by the vision of a shiny happy Jesus accompanied by Moses and Elijah that he thought the end times were coming. Jews believed that since Elijah went bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2: 9-12) and Moses' grave was never found, God would send them back to inform that God's reign was at hand.² Jewish tradition also held that Moses and Elijah, as precursors of the end times, would return on the

² Sarah Henrich, "Reflections on Lectionary" from *Luther Seminary*, www.working-preacher.org. accessed on Feb. 13, 2012.

“Day of the Lord” celebrated during the fall festival of Succoth, or Feast of the Booths. During this festival Jews would construct temporary tents, or booths, which represented God “encamping” with them during their wanderings in the wilderness.³ Jews understood that this high celebratory time would be an ideal place for God to usher in the new age. Peter’s suggestion to make booths, or dwellings, for the three dazzling beings, emerged from his very Jewish understanding that the end times are upon him. No wonder he was terrified at the transfiguration. Not only did Jesus look different, but Peter was afraid that his whole world would look differently very soon.

In fact, though, what was truly being transfigured wasn’t Jesus himself, but Peter, James, and John’s way of seeing him. Jesus looked different all dazzling white, but truly all the bright glory was Christ revealing the God who was and is always within him. The *metamorphoeo* wasn’t that Jesus changed form, but that he showed who he is in truth. Morna Hooker comments that the transfiguration account can really be best understood as a (epiphany) “christophany”—a moment when the disciples see “who Jesus Christ really is.” The true metamorphosis, the true transformation, in this story is not Jesus’s, but the disciples and our own perceptions of him.⁴ Down in the valley, really the flatlands of Galilee, the disciples couldn’t fully see that Jesus was divine. Their vision was cloaked by misunderstandings, and the negative reactions of the authorities. Yet, up on a mountain the disciples see differently. Now don’t look for this mountain on a bible map. “This mountain juts out not from the topography of Galilee, but from the topography of God. This is the mountain of revelation, the mountain of transformed vision, the mountain of true seeing.”⁵ Up on this mountain the disciples can finally see Jesus as part of God—God even says “This

³ Paul Berge, “The Beginning of the Good News.”

⁴ Thomas Long, “Reality Show,” *Christian Century* March 7, 2006, 16.

⁵ Ibid.

is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Up on a mountain the disciples see Jesus in a different light—a blazingly holy light.

This Transfiguration account invites us to see Jesus differently, too. This story encourages us to open up our vision to how Jesus might be visible in our church and in our own lives. Perhaps this text invites us, for example, to see our CCUMC with transformed vision. Down in our valley it can be easy to miss the dazzling vision of Christ among us. Down in our valley it is often hard to see how ministry in Jesus’ name can be sustained. Down in our valley we just look like an old small church tucked away into Second Street. Down in our valley we’re just a teeny, tiny minority in a community that would rather find their own god on a ski slope. As we worship the rest of our town passes by on their way upvalley or to brunch or outdoors, oblivious to the ancient hopes and dreams being spoken of in this sanctuary.

Yet, up on the mountaintop, Jesus shows us that we dazzle as the very kingdom of God. Up on God’s mountain of revelation God says, I have chosen you, the church, as improbable as it seems, to shine forth my glory the world. Just like when you climb in the Elk Mountains, and after coming around a switchback you are astounded with the splendor of Capital Peak, so too God calls us to astound this community of Carbondale with God’s love. Up on a mountaintop we are called to see our church in a different light—to see that the dazzling light of Christ really does shine among us.

The story of the Transfiguration also helps us when we get down in our own personal valleys. Down in the valley, our faith can be buffeted by storms of doubt. Down in the valley snow clouds of insecurities can roll in, and obscure our ability to see any good we could offer. Down in the valley we can’t clearly see where we’re heading in life, or how

we're to get out of challenges. In the valley life can seem as messy and dirty as our cars after a big snowstorm.

Up on the mountain, though, a savior waits for us who is as pure and holy as freshly fallen snow. Up on the mountain we can see that Jesus really is there for us. We can see that no matter who we are and what we've done or haven't done, God says, "you are my beloved." Up on the mountain we see that our doubts and insecurities were all just cloaking our ability to see ourselves as treasured sons and daughters of God.

On the mount of transfiguration we can see our lives and the life of our church in a different light. With Peter, James, and John we can scale the heights of the mountain so that we can see what we cannot see down in our valley. At the top of this mountain of God we have transformed, transfigured vision—true seeing. We can see the splendor of life with God. We can see peaks of grace, mercy, and love. We see that even we are holy, that we can touch God—and that God can touch us. Thanks be to God. Amen