

Peter Was Right about One Thing

Mark 9:2-9

I have seen many things that I would describe as something close to miraculous. One such event happened on a cold winter night in Wisconsin, as I watched for the first time the bright colored light of the Aurora Borealis dancing around the sky. Marla shared about a flight across the Atlantic where she and the pilots in the cockpit watched those same lights flash in their brilliance over the arctic seas. Hopefully, we have all had the experience of standing on some dark clear night and witnessing a sky full of shooting stars flickering across the sky. The brilliance of such lights can take your breath away.

But I suspect that none of these experiences can match that the disciples who witnessed their friend Jesus being transfigured on a mountain top surrounded by the ancient figures of Abraham and Moses. It is quite clear, from what Mark tells us, that the experience was more than a little overwhelming. The disciples are shocked into silence until Peter speaks up and offers to build three tents so that they might enshrine this magnificent moment. His words are interrupted by a heavenly voice from far away and yet as close as a friend standing next to you, "This is My Beloved Son! Listen to Him!"

For almost every year of my ministry, I have woken up on a Monday morning and given a deep sigh of mild dread when I am reminded that next Sunday I will need to wrestle a message from this story. I find it too hard to handle, too impossible to describe, too elusive to come up with a satisfying practical word about how we are to live our faith.

As your pastor, I feel a responsibility to bring to you every week a practical message that you can take home and do something for the following week. I once became friends with a pastor of a large charismatic evangelical church. After hearing me preach on one occasion, he came up to me and complimented the sermon and then added, "You need to make sure you always end your sermon with a challenge to the congregation to do something." For him, there is always a need to respond to the sermon, if not an altar call, which was common in his tradition, at least a commitment to change the way we are living our lives.

It is good advice. I am not doing my job as a pastor if you go home without a to-do list that is in response to the sermon. I hear the voices of the many people in my congregations telling that what they want most from a sermon is a message that has been brought down to their lives, practical advice that helps them get through the week. One of my preaching professors told us to write two words at the top of the page of every sermon, "So What?" He told us to make sure that what we have to say amounts to more than a hill of beans.

But what am I to tell you to do with a story like this, when two ancient spirits from the past stand next to a transfigured Jesus with the voice of God speaking to us from the sky?

Over the years, I have done my best. I've pointed the finger at Peter. Peter seems to always come to the rescue by blurting out some foolish words or making some foolish gesture. We can talk about how silly his suggestion is to build tents for Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. "My goodness man...You have no idea what you are talking about!" We can make some observations about how discipleship is not about holding on to the mountaintop experiences, but it is about going down the mountain and making a difference in the lives of needy people, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. We Americans are a can-do-people. Give us a job and we can get 'er done.

But I have always had the feeling that I am running away as fast as I can from the inexplicable transfiguration of Jesus and the sound of the abstract voice of God coming out of a cloud. It is far easier to take my eyes off of Jesus and put them on to Peter. But this week, I noticed that Peter, far from being foolish, is the one who keeps his eyes on Jesus. In fact, he does not want to let go or run from the experience. It occurred to me that Peter was right about one thing: Maybe we need to turn our eyes again to Jesus transfigured and God speaking. After all, Jesus never corrected Peter for what he said. Jesus did not lecture Peter about wanting to hold onto what was happening and remind him that discipleship is about living in the valley serving people and not worshipping on the mountaintop. Maybe our American propensity for doing things and being ever so practical prevents us from seeing something more profound.

Maybe what we need to do for this one time is not to focus on being practical and wrestling a familiar moral lesson from this story. Rather, why don't we risk lingering for a moment with this transfigured human being and listen to the sound of God's voice? Maybe we need to stay on the mountain with Peter and see the vision of Christ who is charged with light from the living God.

In that one moment, Peter sees the humanity of Jesus transfigured, suffused with the eternal glory of God. A human being reflects the glory of God. In keeping his eyes upon Jesus, Peter, in an instance, sees what we human being in all our imperfect humanity may become. We may also become in some way like God, a reflection of God.

This is a very ancient early Christian idea that was largely lost in Western theological ways of thinking a long time ago. Most of the church in the Western part of the world has been focused so much on human sinfulness that it seemed heretical to dare to image that human beings might be "God-like." However, it is a thought from the earlier church fathers that the Eastern Orthodox Church has held onto. This is the thought: "That in Jesus, God became a human being, revealing to us what it means to be truly human, and in so doing we begin to reflect God." The short version of this: "God became like us so that we might become like God."

This is the great mystery of our faith, that when we finally can accept the full goodness of being human beings and can accept the goodness of all God has created, we begin to reflect God in our lives. When we can give up as Jesus did, trying to be God, and simply accept ourselves for who God has made us, then, and only then, can the glory of God shine through us.

Let me flesh this out (no pun intended). We are not perfect. We will never have it all figured out. We cannot control everything that happens in our lives and in our world. We are fragile and have our limits. We find ourselves in trouble when we attempt to act like we are God.

- We are in trouble when we assume we have the God-like power to control and rule over the people in our lives. Parents are you listening? God entrusts your children to you, but they do not belong to you.
- We are in trouble when we become entitled and think we can have whatever we want, including more than a fair share of the world's goods while others do without.
- We are in trouble when we start to believe we are good enough to judge other human beings and to seek revenge upon our enemies.
- We are in trouble when we believe we have the privilege to refuse to forgive another human being when we are as fallible and culpable as she or he is.

This is why Jesus came to us: To reveal our true selves, for in Him we see what a human being can become. That requires us to keep our eyes upon Jesus - to see the glory of God that shines through, not only on that mountaintop but in all the events of Jesus' life. He shows us, time and again, what it means to be a human being.

- When we meditate upon the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us to have an open heart, especially to the poor, the meek, the peace seekers, and the righteous.
- When we meditate upon Jesus eating with tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes, we learn no longer to judge one another but respect everyone's humanity.
- We learn humility when Jesus is confronted with a hungry foreign woman and allows her to change His mind when she is willing to be like a dog underneath his table looking for a crumb.
- We learn what it means to love when we see an innocent Jesus hanging on a cross and saying "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That is why we worship and turn our eyes to Jesus. This is why we bow down before this one who is infused with the light of God shining through his humanity. We see not only what Jesus is, but what we can become.

Let us now meditate and worship now by keeping our eyes upon Jesus as we sing the chorus for this old gospel hymn.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.