

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday March 2, 2025  
Text: Luke 9:28-36 Transfiguration  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren  
Theme: Listening until life over comes death

This is one of my favorite stories in the New Testament probably because it starts out hiking with Jesus. I love hiking. Just getting outdoors clears the mind and reminds me of the vastness of God's creation.

Three of Jesus' disciples Peter, John, and James are summoned by Jesus to take a trek away from the crowds and to get away to pray. In the end it is only Jesus who prays but all are summoned to prayer just as you and I are. For some of us being in the mountains is still the best place to pray, a place where we come close to God's glory, where worship opens up in natural and deep ways. The Celts talked of thin places, places where the natural world and the supernatural world came close to each other, places where one feels that they could sense or reach over into the Holy from the everyday. Mountains in our sacred scriptures often are understood that way whether in the burning bush of Moses, the gift of the Ten Commandments, or the High places in Israel where sacrificial worship began. Becoming alive to the spiritual dimension in the midst of a natural world is something deeply nurturing to human beings and especially for those for whom "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" as the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins expressed.

In biblical geography God dwells in the heavens and that makes mountains a good place to pray being closer to the sky. It's no accident that cathedrals and churches are often built with soaring space drawing the worshiper upward. The pattern in the passage is interesting. Human beings ascend the mountain and later in the story the voice of the divine descends in the cloud. It is almost as if this is the illustration of prayer, humans ascend and God descends. Prayer itself is always a combination of human striving and divine grace. People like us climb the mountain, place our attention heavenward and God descends to meet us from on high again and again. Like the words found in Eucharistic Prayer D, "When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you, we might find you." BCP 373

This story of the transfiguration is actually a picture of prayer drawn for us. When Jesus engages in prayer, he opens himself up to God in an unfettered way. Prayer takes place in the inner life of Jesus. Jesus is connected to God with the deepest part of himself - open and available. What happens in this communion with God is surprising. Jesus is given the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit fills him, permeates his being, radiates out from him so that he is changed, his very likeness is transfigured, he shines with the inner light of the Spirit. He is a shiny man alive in God. The Spirit of God cannot be contained it shines out, radiates out of from his body into his

clothing and beyond. His garments are ablaze with light and energy and the sleepy disciples cannot help but experience it with awe.

The details about the clothing are interesting. In the gospel of Mark we are given some added explanation, “dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3) The detail is to make sure we don’t just think Jesus had a really good dry cleaner but that the source of this light is different, this light moves from the inside of Jesus out into the world around him. Not just into his clothing but beyond. That is the movement of incarnation. That is the movement of God invading the world around us, filling the world with God’s light and life, that is what our lives are to be about.

The next part of this story is surprising. **Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**

Moses and Elijah join Jesus on the mountain, it’s a gathering of leaders of visionaries in the faith. And it is another picture of what prayer is about. Moses and Elijah were sent by God during their prophetic lives. They often sought out God on the mountain as things developed to see what they were to do next. The mountain was for them a place of vision, direction, communion with God. They went up on the mountain to consult with God about what was taking place below in the valley or on the plain or in the city. The mountain was the place where they received the insight or illumination, the inner light and the courage and strength they needed to go back and lead down below. The illumination of God is needed if we are to be God’s people in the world in the flesh and blood life on earth. If we are going to speak truth to power as Moses did, lead people out of whatever kind of injustice they are suffering or like Elijah call people back to the loving, life-giving ways of God, we will need to be filled not just with our own skills and smarts but with the Spirit from within.

It’s also interesting, Moses and Elijah do not talk about Jesus’ brilliance or his transfigured appearance. Evidently that is to be expected, the brightness of God is normal. They wanted to speak to him about his upcoming action in the world, his liberating action in Jerusalem. They are on the mountain of the Lord but they are concerned about what is happening below on earth in the temporal realm. Their concerns and conversation tell us something important, **“Prayer on the mountain is preparation for action on the earth.”** Why do we gather here each week for prayer? We gather to receive a word from the Lord, to be reminded of who we are and to whom we belong so that we can take action in the world around us, so that we can incarnate the life of God into the world.

One summer when I was at University, I worked in the inner-city of NE Portland Oregon at a black Pentecostal Church called Maranatha. We went to church a lot over that hot summer. At that church there were two good friends and sisters in Christ who sat together down towards the front one was a diminutive white woman and the other was a substantial black woman. During the sermon they were

engaged. Once in a while when they got really into the message the small woman would jump up with her hands in the air and yell Glory! Glory! Glory! And the substantial woman would raise her arms up over her head and in a booming voice rumble out Hallelujah! It was absolutely fantastic! I loved hearing them invoke the Glory of God as if it were present then and there, right before our eyes. The passage today speaks of Glory. It tells us that not only did Jesus appear in glory so did Moses and Elijah. What is glory? Glory it seems is not the isolated individual in touch with God. Glory is not some mysterious light shining through us. Glory is how people enact God's plans for the earth. Glory is when the Lord's prayer becomes true, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Glory is when the ways of God become real on earth, that is glory. And that is why we say that Jesus demonstrated the glory of God by coming among us, by teaching us God's ways, by following the way of the cross. In the early years of the church Bishop Irenaeus said that The Glory of God is the fully alive human being. Let's just think about that for a minute. What would our schools look like if we really believed that the glory of God is the fully alive human being? What would our unemployment rate look like if we practiced this belief that the glory of God is the fully alive human being? How would our care of vulnerable people take shape if we believed this? This past week I spent some difficult time listening to the heart-breaking stories of dedicated federal workers who had precipitously lost their jobs. Maren and I have several friends who have lost their jobs, whose careers of public service are shattered, whose futures are suddenly at risk with no income and no health insurance in just a matter of weeks. It's important for me to hear the stories, this difficult and heart-breaking story. One man who had invested 20+ years of his life said trying to make the world safer from disease said that it had taken 6 months of interviews and qualification to get hired and it had taken just 15 minutes of conversation with a young man more than half his age wearing a temporary name badge who seemed to know nothing about the responsibilities of the person he was firing. One woman who had spent a career working for USAID said that her whole life was about honoring the dignity of others and caring for their well-being and that all of that had been turned on its head in her firing by email after 27 years of service and with the added indignity of 15 minutes to empty her desk watched over by a 20 something male supervising her departure from a department and a mission he knew nothing about and evidently did not care. We are hungry these days for some humanity, for some truth, for some human dignity, sometimes the glory seems to be leaking out of our world. But the gospels give us an image of Jesus, a fully alive human being, connected to God, in love with a flawed humanity, available to healing, open with his wisdom, ready with his wit and that radiance of an inner light made palpable on the mountain. In the end, Jesus demonstrated that glory in a surprising way by being willing to sacrifice himself for the life of the world, to show us a new way, to open a new way, to break open the way of Love. In Jesus, we learn that there are some defeats that are more glorious than victories.

One of the questions we must ask about this story is where are we in this story? The disciples whom Jesus takes with him up the mountain are portrayed in an interesting way. They are both weighed down by sleep and they managed to stay

awake. This in-between state of waking and sleeping is a kind of symbolic state of “getting it” and “not getting it.” They are a picture of us as we struggle to understand the words and life of Jesus. The state of the disciples reminds us of how the spiritual life works, we see but don’t see clearly. We learn something but realize that there is more to come.

The impetuous Peter shows us the way. He wants to hold on to the moment, to memorialize it. He wants to build something, put up structures to honor the event. In the Hebrew writings a tent was a symbol of the divine presence. But Peter also makes a critical mistake. He sees the three figures as equals and that is quickly corrected. A cloud descends and overshadows the mountain, Peter, James and John are enveloped into this cloud. And the divine voice speaks but not just to Jesus, to the disciples as well. The voice is clear and definite. The message is not ambiguous. Jesus is the Son of God, God’s chosen One. The task of discipleship is not to build three tents or even one tent. Jesus is not to be housed or worshiped. Jesus is to be heard. “Listen to him!” The thundering voice dissipates the cloud and they encounter Jesus alone.

Silence. Silence follows. This is the only proper response to the holiness of God, to being corrected by the almighty. Like us, the disciples are awake and asleep. They are partially right and partially wrong when they speak. The experience on the mountain takes them into silence. They realize that what they know is only provisional, there is more to come. Silence is the beginning of listening. Even a superficial silence is important as it can lead to a deeper silence to an empty and receptive mind – that is the goal of listening.

The Transfiguration is not just a beautiful story about hiking with Jesus though it certainly is that. It is rather a story that is deeply symbolic. It desires to teach us about the Christian life. The Christian life is about paying attention to what God is doing right in front of us. We are to “ponder the things that we have seen.” We are to listen to the events of Jesus’ life until the truth of those events deepens in our lives. We are to become silent in the midst of our own lives so that we might listen to the words and life of Jesus.

The truth is that the gospels are strange. They contain spiritual wisdom in pictures and puzzles, parables and paradox. Often the adventure of following Jesus conflicts with the conventional understandings and ways of living around us: Love our enemies, give without expecting something in return, forgive those who hurt us. The challenge of listening to Jesus, of hearing his words and cultivating them in our hearts until we understand the way is not easy. It may require that we let go of some of our favorite certainties our treasured ways of thinking. The question is do we believe that listening to Jesus leads to life and love, for if this is the case then all of our “letting go” can be done with joy at its center. Like the parable of the pearl of great price, “then, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44). If we believe that the Christian way of life is really the best way to live, the way that leads to life that is really life, that being a Christ-bearer is really its

own reward, then we are on the path to wisdom to discovering the glory of the fully alive human being.

Are Jesus' words, words that lead to life, a life that keeps redoubling, that keeps growing, the kind of life we call eternal? The story of the transfiguration invites us to trek with Jesus, to be a journey of ever deepening life with God. To open ourselves up to glory, to the glory of being a fully alive human being, a human being that knows that God's ways are love, life-giving and liberating. That is the way of glory, to let light and life shine through you, to give your own life away so that in that self-giving new life, abundant life might take its place.

This is why we are invited to listen, to listen to the strange beautiful words of Jesus, until they become part of us, until life overcomes death.

*Note: I am deeply indebted to the writing of John Shea on this passage. His insights into the dimensions of prayer in this passage were essential to this sermon.*