

*Seeing the Light*

Mark 9:2-9 ~ 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Transfiguration of the Lord February 11, 2018

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INTRODUCTION:

We are about to hear a gospel story this morning, which is both dramatic and subtle at the same time. Yes, there is dazzling light, revenants appearing and disappearing, and the voice of God interrupting Peter from a cloud. All very dramatic, but there is also a subtle underpinning to this story, grounding Jesus in Israel's past, moving forward to his impending death, and pointing to his resurrected glory. The story begins with an ascent up a mountain and ends in a very silent descent. I invite you to put on your spiritual hiking boots, fill up your water bottles, and don't forget the sunscreen—it's going to be very bright up there.

So let's have a listen to this story, the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord, traditionally read on this Sunday, the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, when Lent begins. We find it in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Today, we hear it from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 9:2-9.

SERMON:

When I was growing up, summer vacation meant one thing for my family: going hiking in the mountains. Every summer we would start our hiking vacations with short "warm-up" hikes, my father would call them. You know, just 5 – 7 milers, with slow, gentle (Wisconsin-style) hills. Then we would work up to what he called the "no-nonsense trails" which meant switchbacks, with a steady steep ascent, "Is *this* going to be the last hill, Dad?"

It doesn't take long to learn the basics of hiking. I think all children would agree—hiking is a slow, tedious sport. Some may question whether it should count as a sport at all. From a child's perspective, it's a rather plodding experience with no immediate payoff. And being the youngest of four kids, trying desperately to keep up with my older siblings, hiking seemed even slower and harder to me. Miles took too long to count, so when I really got desperate, I'd start counting my footsteps. In my family early on we'd been taught, "there's no complaining in hiking."

Getting to the top seemed endless. I had no idea of where I was, or how much farther we had to go. And it seems like the mountain is messing with you when you get closer to the top. Just when you think nothing can be higher than the ridge you're climbing, "Oh, yes, this has got to be it!" But then you reach the crest of that ridge, and another higher peak appears in the distance. "Nope. Not there yet."

Now I'm starting to feel tired and hungry. Not complaining out loud of course, I wonder to myself, "Why does Dad insist that we eat lunch at the top? This spot right here looks perfect to me." I keep walking, slowly, wondering whether it would be worth it to go down the trail, losing precious altitude, to get another lemon drop from my mom, who is taking her time identifying wild flowers, when I decide to look up the trail one more time. Much to my surprise and delight, in the distance, the very site I have been dreaming about comes into view: my dad, sitting on a rock, pulling our sandwiches from his backpack. I made it!

The surprise was on me, though. In a few more steps, I get to the top and all of a sudden I'm no longer obsessing about my crushed peanut butter sandwich, because the view is so surprising and spectacular. Everything looks different from here. I look down and see those hills I thought were so huge, but now they are tiny. I look up and instantly, a whole new range of mountains come into view on the other side of our mountain. The world below us seems so small and orderly. And the sky up here is so spacious, almost touchable. I'm thrilled and awed.

From the beginning of time, mountains have drawn people to God. Mountains have provided the stage on which mystical encounters with our Creator have taken place. From atop Mt. Sinai, as the story goes, a cloud covered the mountain and forty days and nights later, it was then and there that Moses received from God the two tablets of the covenant known as the Ten Commandments.

What happened about 1200 years later when Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain? Words fail to describe exactly what happened up there. According to Mark, Jesus' appearance changed, he was transfigured, his clothes turned a dazzling white, whiter than anything they'd ever seen on this earth: God gave them a glimpse of the glory of Christ. Somehow the veil was lifted between heaven and earth, and their eyes were filled with the sight of Jesus' face and clothes all lit up and there he was talking to, Moses, their long departed luminary who led the Exodus out of Egypt, and Elijah, the prophet who had been taken up in a whirlwind.

"Is this a dream?" They likely wondered. No it's not. So Peter starts blathering about how cool this is. I'm thinking that if this happened today, Peter would be whipping out his smart phone to take a "selfie" with them; and asking if he could friend them on FaceBook. He clearly wants to hang on to them and this incredible moment, "Say how about setting a tent? I know, not one, but three tents...Come on, wouldn't that be..." Mark writes, "He did not know what to say, because he was terrified." Then it got even more mystical - God silences Peter mid-sentence with a cloud and a three-word command to redirect Peter: "This is my Son, the Beloved;

listen to HIM!” On the way down the mountain, Jesus orders them to tell no one about this experience, until after the Son of Man rises from the dead. Not until they see and experience the full story. No: It’s not just about bright and shiny, Peter. There’s more, much more to this story.

The Word from God to Peter at that moment and the Word I hear from God to us today is this, “If you want to see the Light, if you want to reflect the light, listen to Him!” Listen to CHRIST! If Christ is your Lord and Savior, Keep listening to him. If only we did that, if only we really listened to Christ, and kept listening, how different our lives and the world would be.

That’s a big “if”. Let’s be honest: don’t we find it a lot easier to listen to just about anyone else, than God? Think about it: Who *do* we listen to most of the time? The voices in our head? The voices that are shouting all around us? The little screen of our smart phones, or the bigger screens of our laptops, desktops, and TV’s? If you’re wondering how to see and reflect *Christ’s* love and glory, get on your hiking boots! Don’t panic: I mean this metaphorically: you don’t need to be a hiker, or a walker, you could do this kind of hiking in a wheelchair. All you need is the desire to tune your heart to Jesus. If you open your heart to Jesus in prayer, if you listen to Him, you will see everything in a different light. As Paul writes, “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.” (2 Corinthians 3:16) When one turns to the Lord, like the view from the top of a mountain, one’s perspective on everything is transfigured or altered.

So what keeps us from going up the mountain? We have a lot of reasons. More than I could name or know. Maybe we don’t think we know how to find the trailhead. Maybe we’re afraid of what we’ll find along the trail. Maybe as bad as things are, we’re scared to death of changing from what we know to what we don’t know. Maybe we think too much of ourselves, “I’ve got this, I don’t need your help,” or maybe we think too little of ourselves, “Who am I, that the God of all Creation would want to talk to me or care about my little problems?”

I have found in my prayer life that the first step is the hardest. Just like they say about going for a run or for a walk, “the first ten steps are the hardest.” You know: carving out the time, getting dressed, getting out the door, that’s the hardest part, really. If we just get ourselves to the trailhead, if we just “go to the mountain” and open up enough to give God the room to move in our hearts and minds, God will do the rest. God will take it from there. We don’t have to change ourselves. All we have to do is quiet the inner chatter, and tune out those voices around us, turn away from those screens to which we instinctively turn, so that we can listen to our Savior, to Christ. Let the Divine Voice have the floor, for a change.

Let's be honest: silence can be scary. And it doesn't happen overnight. As exciting as flashes of light and a voice thundering out of a cloud may be, prayer is usually a slow, quiet, subtle process. Moses had to wait forty days. And Jesus had to spend forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Slow and quiet, seems to be God's preferred mode of communication. We take one step at a time, often unaware of any progress we are making. We don't always know where we are going. We can get tired, frustrated and confused. There are valleys we must walk through. And times we feel lost. Yet somewhere along the trail, we discover that walking with Christ, listening to Christ, our Savior, is what really matters. It is *on the trail*, where we too, can be transfigured.

Here's the good news, the payoff that is even better than a mountain vista: trudging along the mountain path of prayer situates us exactly where we can claim our freedom. Freedom from our old bad habits, our pretenses, our desperate need to be in control, or to apologize for ourselves. Prayer can set us free from the prejudices, which cause us to categorize and judge, or to label and dismiss people who are different from us. If we really open our hearts and listen to Christ, God will give us the freedom, the energy, the vision, the capacity, to see others with Jesus' eyes. To love others as Jesus loves us.

Perhaps there is something you wish you could change about yourself, but just can't do it alone. Maybe you have gotten into a rut, whether it's a bad habit, or a destructive habit of mind, that seems too deep to dig your way out of. The mountain of prayer awaits you. As Richard Foster, theologian and author in the Quaker tradition has said, "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us."

Whatever your hesitation, whatever may be keeping you from going up the mountain of prayer, we have a fresh chance to begin again. This Wednesday, February 14, is Ash Wednesday, when Lent begins. Lent is what we call the forty days (minus the Sundays) before Easter, the Day of Resurrection. Like Moses' forty days on the mountain, and Jesus forty days in the wilderness, forty days is a holy interval of we find throughout the Bible, that leads to divine revelation. As a church, we set aside these forty days to take stock of ourselves, our relationship to Christ, and to engage more deeply in listening to Christ. Sure, you could skip this forty-day hike of Lent, jump in a helicopter do a fly over and swoop in on Easter just in time for the trumpets and the Hand bells. But if you did, you would miss hearing what Christ wants to teach you, to change about you, to help you. We would miss what *you* have to teach us.

Let this Lent be a season where you respond to God's call in our text today, to, "Listen to Him!" And you don't have to do it alone. Moses didn't: Moses took Joshua with him. Jesus didn't. Jesus took Peter, John and James. Start this Wednesday, by attending our short Ash Wednesday service here in the sanctuary. And then come to our Lenten Supper Services the next five Wednesdays in Lent where starting in a circle and then around the supper tables, eat together, think together, pray, sing, about the multiple rays of light that Jesus says he is: Living Water, Bread of Life, the Grape Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection & the Life. Jesus cannot be contained in a dwelling constructed by Peter or by us, nor can the Christ be contained by any one image. There is always more. There is the bright and shiny Jesus, but there is also the suffering, bloody, bullied Jesus. Jesus invites us to embrace an ever fuller spectrum of who Christ really is. Let this be the Lent where you see the Light and reflect the Light as you never have before.

I will close with one more story from when I was a little girl about four years old and too young to hike very far. Our family rented a small cabin at the foot of Mt. Chocoura in New Hampshire for the month of August that summer. One morning on our last week there, my dad took my biggest sister and brother on a hike up Mr. Chicoura. They brought with them a small, compact mirror from my mom's purse. A few hours after they had set out, my mom said, "it's time girls! Let's go outside and see if we can see the light!" I had no idea what she was talking about. The three of us walked outside and looked up and up to the very distant top of the mountain. All of a sudden we could see a tiny beam of light bouncing around the trees, reflecting the sun. It seemed like a miracle to me, that a tiny, maybe 3-inch mirror reflecting the sunlight could be so bright over four miles away, down where we were standing. But that is what God can do with you and me, and us, FPC Marshfield. If we want to see the light, if we want to reflect the true Light of Christ's embracing, inclusive Love into our community, let's listen to him.