

Read Mark 9:2-9

There are countless stories in the Bible to which we can relate. Even though they were written in ancient times, they still make sense to us in modern times. However, today's passage may be an exception. The episode in Matthew, Mark, and Luke sounds a bit far fetched or bizarre. Jesus leads three of his disciples up a mountain on a day hike and he is transfigured before them and glows with bright whiteness. Moses, who has been dead for more than a millennium, and Elijah, gone for eight centuries, suddenly appear and strike up a conversation with Jesus.

Peter does not know what to say about this strange experience, so he does what many guys would do. He suggests they do something manly. "Let's build something!" he says, "How about a dwelling for each of you?" "We might be here a while so we might as well be comfortable." Great idea! Let's get to the hardware store for supplies and get going!

Some commentators interpret Peter's actions to mean that he was attempting to hang on to this mountaintop spiritual experience so that it did not pass too quickly. And that may be the case, but I wonder if Peter was trying to nail down something with the hopes of making it more concrete.

Each of us may have had a mountaintop experience and it was one of those "aha" moments, but like I have said to youth and even to myself, we cannot stay there, we have to come down from the mountain and share the experience with others and move forward in our faith.

Jesus does not respond to Peter's suggestion and about that time, a cloud envelops them. the disciples hear a voice that seems to emanate from the cloud.

The voice from heaven speaks the same words we heard at the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. “This is my Son, the Beloved. With him I am well pleased.” Only this time, the voice adds an important command to the statement. This time, God says, “Listen to him!” God doesn’t say, “listen to *me*,” but “listen to *him*.”

Listen to Jesus. Pay attention to what he’s saying, even when it doesn’t make sense to you. When he tells you that he is about to suffer, that the religious leaders are going to reject him, that he will be killed, and that he will rise again from the dead after three days, you need to believe him. This may not match what you think the Messiah is supposed to do, but it is. Listen to him.

It might come as no surprise to you that many pastors go to great lengths to avoid preaching on this passage. Some of them harbor unkind thoughts toward those who created the lectionary, because they inserted the story of the Transfiguration into the lectionary every single year.

The problem with the passage is that it seems to stretch the limits of our imagination and understanding. Some people establish their faith on supernatural events, and there is nothing wrong with that, but many of us prefer hard facts and experiences to which we can relate. Perhaps we should simply place this passage in the category of metaphor rather than historical occurrence and, if we take that path, I believe we can glean some valuable insights.

In modern times, most of us have been taught to equate truth with historical facts, even though at times, they may be susceptible to being true. However, religious truth adds another dimension. Looking at an experience rationally and analytically, gives us the height and width of reality, but spiritual insight adds something more. It can move us beyond the “what” of life to the “why” of life.

Some of our most powerful moments in life may be the most difficult to explain.

- Maybe you have stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon or somewhere similar and been overwhelmed with a feeling of awe at the grandeur of God's creation.
- Perhaps a piece of music struck chords deep in you affecting you in ways words simply cannot express.
- You might have served food to people who were hungry and then sat down and chatted with someone who was homeless, and your heart ached as they told you their story and at some point, you realized they are a child of God not just some stranger.

Commentators suggest Mark had one single purpose in mind when he wrote his gospel: that all would believe that Jesus is the Son of God. If we believe this to be true, what are we to do with this story of Christ's transfiguration, and with our own transformation into his image?

Perhaps it says that we need to relish the extraordinary moments of life and not be too quick to dismiss what we cannot fully explain or understand. Perhaps this story encourages us to hone our vision so that we can see, once again, what we saw as children: the wonder, the beauty, and the glory of life. Perhaps this story says to us that when we are aware of being in the presence of God, life glows with an extraordinary radiance.

Thomas Long talks about George Buttrick, an influential preacher of the 20th century, who told a story about a congregation in New York City.

This church had a large stained-glass window on the wall behind the chancel. This window depicted a scene from the Book of Revelation: the heavenly city coming down from above. It contained a lot of gaudy colors:

- Streets of gold
- Aquamarine river of life

- Amethysts and a pearl palace descending from heaven

The congregation hated it because it was too pious and too other worldly. That wasn't their city! Their city did not have streets of gold; this was New York!

But as the years went by something interesting happened. The colors in the window began to fade, until ever so slightly you could see through the window to the city beyond; to the tenements and the skyscrapers. It was then, that the window began to take on power as the heavenly city and *their* city began to merge. ¹

We live in times when hard economic realities are wreaking havoc with people's lives. We are still living in the midst of a pandemic that is wreaking havoc. We are still living in times of social injustices that continue to wreak havoc in lives. And it is easy to peruse the landscape and see only anxiety and anger. But if we look with a different set of eyes, there are moments when it is possible to see exceptional people who are aglow because Christ-like compassion and determination radiate in them.

Every time we encounter God in a tangible way, it's scary. The disciples were terrified on the mountain that day. The fabric that separates the ordinary from the holy is torn, and God's glory shines through to blind us with light brighter than we can imagine. We want to make sense of it all. We try to assign meaning to the various elements of the story, and if we only had a Secret Jesus Decoder Ring, we could figure it out!

It is just at that moment, when things can't possibly get any more confusing or terrifying, that a voice comes out of the cloud overshadowing our fears and doubts.

Life is steeped with the light and life of God and sometimes we are privileged to have the curtain drawn back for a moment so that we glimpse reality in all of its mystery, in all of its holiness, and in all of its splendor.

We are entering the season of Lent, a time to grow closer to God, to become more faithful as we follow Jesus. It is a time to look deeply inside our own hearts to see what holds us back from becoming all that God created us to be, and to repent of the distractions we let come between us and the God who loves us. It is a time to grow more deeply connected to Christ, to seek for him in scripture and in prayer.

It is a time to live into the absurdity that, though we are broken, sinful people, and as Paul tells us, we who have put on Christ are being changed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 2:18). It is a time to focus our attention so that, no matter where we look, we see only Jesus. May it be so.

1. Tom Long, "Telling Time" at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA February 8, 2009.