

## CREATED ANEW: Descending to Share the Story

Mark 9:2-9

February 11, 2024

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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I.

Do you remember the fog that settled over Jefferson City a few weeks ago? Not just the morning fog that this river city is familiar with but a thick blanket of fog that hovered over us in the afternoon and early evening for a couple of days. I remember working in my office and looking out my window just after lunch, wondering about the ominous darkness that had moved in, looking to the sky expecting to see a large alien spaceship blocking the sun and Cousin Eddie flying his plane right into the center of it to save planet earth like in the movie *Independence Day*.

On the drive home in the fog, I had trouble making out the usual landmarks and places familiar to me. I could barely see the taillights of the car in front of me. Through the fog, everything looked different. The city I've known all my life looked different.

Have you ever had an experience where a new circumstance changed the way you saw something or someone?

Maybe a blanket of fog changed your drive home and forced you to see things you hadn't seen before. Perhaps you've been thinking about purchasing a new red jeep, and now, everywhere you look, you see red jeeps. You never noticed them before, and they didn't just magically appear because you decided to buy one. None of you are influencers with that level of influence. You are awake now to what you'd been asleep to, aware of what already existed. Maybe you read a book that changed how you view a topic, person, or historical moment. Perhaps you learned something new about a person's story that caused you to see them differently. Maybe someone you deeply love died, and you are thinking about death and heaven in ways you've never considered before. Perhaps you or someone close to you has battled an illness or addiction, and you've learned the hard way that life is messy and full of shades of grey.

Something or someone that was once one or two-dimensional to you now has multiple layers or dimensions, and your awareness changes you, or it should.

II.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday in the church, remembering one of the Gospels' most spectacular and surprising stories. It is the day we hear the gospel story of Jesus and three of his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, climbing to the top of a mountain. In ancient literature, mountains are places of meeting between heaven and earth. While there, Jesus is transfigured before them, meaning he is transformed or changed. Jesus' garments turn dazzlingly white beyond anything our earthly bleach can produce, and Jesus is radiant and glistening, his glory shining brightly.

The great figures of Israel's past, Moses and Elijah, join as cameos in a conversation with Jesus. Only Luke's Gospel gives us an idea of what the three discuss – Jesus's upcoming death and resurrection.

Understandably, Peter, James, and John are terrified by all of it. They don't know what to do or say, but that doesn't stop dear Peter from speaking. As a faithful Jew who knows his scriptures, Peter knows you build a tent when God makes an appearance. So, faced with uncertainty, Peter reverts to what he knows and declares, "Let's build three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus." But then, a cloud of divine presence, imagine that thick blanket of fog from a couple of weeks ago, overshadows them all, and a voice says to the three disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

Their senses have been overwhelmed. They see Jesus in a new light, literally. They see Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's all-stars, representing the law and the prophets from the past. And now, they are overshadowed by a cloud and a divine voice disrupting their tent-making plans with something it wants us and the three disciples to hear: "Listen to him."

And then, poof – the cloud is gone along with Moses and Elijah. Now what?

Verse 9 says, "As they were coming down the mountain, [Jesus] ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean." (v.9)

III.

Reading multiple theologians and Biblical scholars and hearing them confess that they have no idea what this story means is comforting to me. I appreciate their honesty and their refusal, unlike Peter, to fill the moment with what they think they're supposed to say. We believe we are supposed to know. But sometimes we don't. That could apply to a lot of the Bible. We try to glean some lessons and make some applications. We take wonder and awe and cram it into three points, and if those three points all start with the same letter or make a cool acronym, all the better.

But maybe, like Peter, James, and John, we're supposed to stand in wonder and awe at the glory of Jesus. Perhaps this moment on the mountain was more to strengthen Jesus for what was ahead than a teaching moment for Peter, James, and John, just like Jesus's prayer time in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion was for him, not these three same friends who couldn't stay awake. It doesn't always have to be about us or what we get from it.

Maybe the cloud wasn't even planned but rather an impromptu response from God to Peter's plan to take control of the moment with some tent-making. The divine cloud disorients them from their plans so they can see in a new way when the cloud is lifted. Perhaps all that is asked of us is what is asked of the disciples: listen to Jesus. When we come back down from the mountain, listen to Jesus.

Theologian Rev. Dr. Martha Simmons has a great way of describing the kind of praxis-oriented tension that all eschatology provides: it is, she says, “where the sweet by and by meets the nasty here and now.<sup>i</sup> By that, she means the mountaintop is real, the kingdom of God is real, but we don’t live there in fullness yet. We live in the valley, and things can be nasty and messy here. God meets us on the mountaintops, but God also meets us right here in the valley.

#### IV.

When Jesus and the three come down from the mountain, they run right into the nasty here and now. After their mountain high, the very next day, they encounter the terrible low of a father desperate for healing for his tormented son. The man shouts out to Jesus from the crowd saying, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” (v.17-18)

Friends, we are far more familiar with this scene than the mountaintop. This is the nasty here and now. Children are hurting. Parents are angry, heartbroken, and desperate for an answer. Mental illness for all ages is a national epidemic with far too much shame and far too few resources. This exhausted dad doesn’t know what just happened up on the mountain and probably wouldn’t care. He needs Jesus in his valley. And Jesus meets him there, healing his son. The sweet by-and-by meets the nasty here and now.

Perhaps this is how Jesus fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah that *every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.* (Isaiah 40:4-5)

Just like at his birth, Jesus descended into our world, shining his light in all the dark places around and within, bringing healing and hope and inviting his disciples and us, the beloved of God, to do the same as the ones who have been forever transfigured and changed by our encounter with the divine.

#### V.

In his book *Whistling in the Dark*, theologian Frederick Buechner reflects on the Transfiguration this way: “[In the Transfiguration] it was the holiness of [Jesus] shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it that they were almost blinded. Even with us, something like that happens once in a while. The face of a man walking his child in the park, of a woman picking peas in the garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a cold drink at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it’s almost beyond bearing.”

Perhaps Buechner takes too much liberty with the transfiguration, making it ordinary and mundane. However, maybe it is precisely what we need to hear to wake us up to see the world around us in a new way, to see the divine in creation and the created, to see Jesus dwelling with us here in our valleys, to listen to Jesus teaching us how we might carry this transfigured light

out into the world, refracting it with all we meet. Maybe it isn't as difficult as we make it to bring the sweet by and by into the nasty here and now.

As Scott Hoezee remarked, "Even on all kinds of days when the disciples and Jesus were by no means having a mountaintop experience and when dazzling garments whiter than white were nowhere to be seen, even then when Jesus smiled kindly at lepers, looked pained to see a sinner being shunned by the Temple establishment, or looked winsome after telling a hurting prostitute to go in peace because her sins were forgiven, there was a sense in which the disciples were seeing the face of the divine transfigured in also those ordinary moments. They were seeing hints of glory. They were seeing God, vividly and surprisingly, and yes, dazzlingly on display in God's One and Only Son, full of grace and truth."<sup>ii</sup>

VI.

I love to go for walks downtown, in my neighborhood, or on nearby trails. Often, I listen to podcasts. Sometimes music. And sometimes, I still myself enough to pay attention to the world around me, seeing things I often miss in the fog of everyday busyness. I'm moved by the face of the divine in ordinary people and moments, the moments where I see the hand of God or the best parts of humanity, the moments when I recognize the divine in every face, in every creature, and the beauty of the world around us.

Last week, on a walk, I saw a dad playing basketball in the driveway with his two small boys. I'm sure he was tired after a long day of work and tired of chasing the basketball that never made it into the hoop, but he loves his sons, so he gives up his time for them. I saw an older man walking his dog, pausing to let him savor the rich smell of every single thing to the dog's delight because he loves his dog.

Here at FBC JC recently, I've witnessed members prepare and serve a meal for grieving families and friends, making food and love multiple in miraculous ways. I sat in on a Mission JC planning meeting in awe of the gifts, passion, and willingness of those around the table to add more to already full plates so we might bring hope and kindness to our community in a day of service. I saw community friends and guests of the Room at the Inn step up to clean dishes and carry trays at our Wednesday meal, eager to serve others. These divine moments left me in awe and wonder, seeing hints of glory that brought light to others and me.

I confess I don't see these moments enough, but it isn't because there aren't a ton of red jeeps out there already. It's because I'm not awake to what already exists. I'm not looking for the divine, and I'm not listening to Jesus as I should. It is in looking and listening that we are transfigured, too.

Remember, dear friends, nine disciples didn't go up the mountain top. They didn't see what Peter, James, and John saw or hear about it until after Jesus's death. They were in the valley, among the hurt and the hard of life, still believing and trusting Jesus because they saw the face of the divine transfigured in those ordinary moments with Jesus. They saw God, vividly and surprisingly, and yes, dazzlingly on display in God's One and Only Son, full of grace and truth. So,

if life today feels more like a valley than a mountaintop, take heart. Jesus dwells with us in the valley, and there are hints of glory all around us. May we have eyes to see and ears to listen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> Martha Simmons, "Introduction," in 9.11.01: African American Leaders Respond to an American Tragedy, ed. M. Simmons and F. Thomas (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2001), x.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2021-02-08/mark-92-9-3/>