

A Moment that Changes Everything

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

[Sermon Germination Group: Peter McWilliams, Brendan Pham]

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Text: Mark 9:2-9

The women are elderly—ranging from 89 to 96 years old---and never had the chance to mark the passage from youth to young adulthood with the traditional Jewish coming-of-age ritual. In their day, it just wasn't celebrated with girls. So they're doing it now. A recent *Plain Dealer* story profiled 10 women living at Menorah Park who have been preparing for their *bat mitzvah* and learning to read the prayers and Scripture texts in Hebrew (no small feat at any age!). In addition, each woman will offer a reflection about the spiritual values by which she strives to live. I looked at the photographs of their deeply lined—but absolutely radiant---faces, and marveled at the significance the *bat mitzvah* obviously held for each of them.

Think of a moment that changed your life. Maybe it was a single experience; an unforgettable relationship; a decision you made at a crossroads that propelled you towards a particular path. It may have been a moment that lasted a split second, or one you struggled with for years. Maybe you realized its significance immediately, or maybe you understood it only later, looking back. Whatever it was, however it happened, dramatic or ordinary, these experiences awaken us, jar our perceptions, and cause us to see life differently than we did before. Our Scripture text describes such a moment, an event in the lives of Jesus' disciples that offered a profound experience of illumination. Its effect on them was not unlike that of the bat mitzvah women: a moment of bright clarity strong enough to counterbalance doubts and disappointments and deferred dreams.

Mark makes this mountaintop vision the literal and figurative center of the gospel. Situated midway between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection, it's presented as an affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Promised One. The experience made all the difference to the disciples when their world came crashing down around them soon after when their leader was crucified. In fact, the shadow of Jesus' death hangs over this text. His words and actions have repeatedly brought him into conflict with both civil and religious authorities, and there have been threats on his life. Jesus himself has told the disciples that he will undergo great suffering and be killed. Now he takes three of them up a mountain to pray. The geographic detail is not incidental. To the ancients, mountains were considered points of contact with God. They were the places where earth and heaven touch—"thin places"—where the line between the material and spiritual world is blurred, and revelation seems imminently possible. Listen for God's Word from the mountaintop, in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the ninth chapter at the second verse. [Mark 9:2-9]

There's little doubt about the significance of this event for Jesus' disciples. Though they may have understood it only retrospectively following Jesus' death and rising, it served to confirm their teacher as God's beloved son and that his suffering, death, and resurrection were essential parts of his mission. They saw the light, they heard the Voice: *This is my beloved Son; listen to him!*

Its meaning for us is not so obvious. How are we going to get our rational minds wrapped around this supernatural vision of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah bathed in dazzling light? Is there anything here for us other than envy of such direct and powerful spiritual enlightenment? Why doesn't God make a more dramatic appearance into our lives, providing unmistakable evidence of divine glory and grace, and guiding us through the rugged paths and difficult valleys of our lives?

. . . .but maybe God does. When I posed this question to the sermon germination group, I expected them to shake their

heads perhaps a little sadly, but knowingly, aware that God doesn't speak to us post-modern people like that. Did I get that one wrong! Instead, each had his own experience of spiritual renewal and striking clarity amid challenging circumstances. One told of how God transformed his grief over the death of his best friend—a contemporary in his 30s—into a new understanding of communion with Christ and his friend. Another person shared about recovery from an illness that admits no easy victory. And both named God as the source of these changes, providing healing and strength and a sense of serenity beyond what they could produce on their own. It just may be that our Presbyterian sense of order, and the value we place on an intellectual approach to spirituality, make us reticent to share our experiences of God breaking into our everyday lives. If we don't learn anything from this text except confirmation of these moments—and perhaps a willingness to share these experiences with others, it will be enough. There are stories of God's work among the people of this congregation to nurture the faith of us all.

Maybe we get so hung up on the details and explanations of the biblical transfiguration story that we miss its meaning as a portal into the glory of God, the holy mystery behind what we can see and hear. Maybe our devotion to rationality blinds us to the truth beyond human invention or control. Who can blame the apostle Peter's impulse to build the dwellings around the three figures?—it's just his way of trying to make sense out of it; to make it fit with his understanding and expectation of the way things are; to make it permanent, to make it accessible. But God's ways are not our ways, my friends. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And enlightenment begins when we give up the need to control, when we let go of ego, and acknowledge instead our need of divine grace beyond our own gifts and skills, considerable though they be.

Peter gets wowed into silence, and at Jesus' command, the disciples didn't speak about the experience until later, when they came to see the light etched in the outline of a cross, and

pouring from an empty tomb. While such clarity may not be granted every day, it doesn't mean that God's glory remains hidden to us. It isn't by accident that the biblical vision occurred when they were praying, in a posture of openness and expectation. And notice how the vision did not occur as the result of an individual quest, but in the company of companions who shared the journey together. It's as if Mark wrote this scene expressly for anyone struggling to perceive and believe good news.

Spiritual enlightenment comes not simply to the devoted and faithful, to those folks with rare insight. It is given as a gift to those who are hungry and restless and maybe even terrified. Somewhere else Jesus noted that to seek it is to find it. Yet how easy it is to drift, to be consumed by our own pursuits and priorities that our eyes are dulled to the divine light permeating the whole creation, and the noise of our busy-ness drowns out the divine voice. The story is told about Joan of Arc when she was brought before the Pope on charges of heresy and insubordination to the Church. She explained that God had spoken to her and commissioned her to act. The Pope responded by asking, "And why would God speak to you, a young peasant girl, and not to me?" Joan's response: "Perhaps he is, sir, and you are not listening."

Philosopher and author Sam Keen wrote, "I suspect that we are all recipients of cosmic love notes; messages, omens, voices, revelations and appeals are all part of each day's events. . .if only we know how to listen, to read the signs."

The days' events lately have been marked by uncertainty. Financial market reversals have gone global and leave none of us untouched. Realities we took for granted now seem vulnerable and contingent. Jobs shift or even disappear altogether. Yet amid the insecurity, against a backdrop of decline and disappointment and even naked fear, God is sending us love notes. And these are not so hidden as we might think. On the mountain of illumination the divine voice identifies Jesus as the beloved Son. And then, "Listen to him."

But listen to what? The voice from the cloud imparts no new information, but instead directs their attention to Jesus—to what he has said and done and will do. In Jesus we see the love of God revealed like nowhere else. A healing love, a forgiving love, a saving love that not even death can destroy. A love that changes everything because it changes us. A love that takes the terror from the unknown because it shows us that God is there, too.

In what turned out to be Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech delivered on the eve of his assassination, he spoke of the difficult days that lay ahead: *[but] it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. . . .but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any[one]. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.* [I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World by Martin Luther King Jr., edited by James Melvin Washington, Harper San Francisco, 1986, 1992] Surely his vision of a promised land of equal opportunity and justice and peace helped sustain many through the years when hope was in short supply. And even more, the promise of a better day galvanized many—both black and white---to bring it to pass. The election of President Obama is one measure of the impact of Dr. King's dream.

Because finally, friends, spiritual enlightenment is not an end in itself. Its power lies in the ability to prepare us for living faithfully, day after day. The biblical account of the moment that changed everything for Peter, James, and John does not end on the mountain top. Jesus leads them back down to the places where human life is lived. He prepared them - as he prepares us—for the work ahead: for healing, witnessing,

teaching, giving, loving, keeping on until the Kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

The bat mitzvah women of Menorah Park understand this. They spoke of the experience as consecrating them for righteous living, following in the footsteps of the prophets to make the world a better place. Following the ceremony, the women will leave the synagogue in procession, accompanied by music. “We’ll be going out in style,” one 90-year-old noted, to which one woman added, “yes, with our walkers.” The particular circumstances of our lives –our own vulnerabilities, hurts, and fears---need not be a barrier to our own transfiguration.

There are hungry hearts and hurting voices in the place where we live that need our attention and care. Let the bright moments of clarity and inspiration move us to offer ourselves as instruments of God’s peace, by which we come to make a difference in the world. Let them move us to follow Jesus. Yes, that way leads to a cross, a way marked by sacrifice and struggle, blood, sweat, and tears. But it will just as certainly take us to a garden tomb, empty of everything but the love of God, today, tomorrow, forever. AMEN.

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