

Lord of Life Lutheran
Transfiguration
February 19
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TEXTS Psalm 50:1-6 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 Mark 9:2-9

SERMON

A number of years ago, when the economy was strong and the winter was far too long, my husband and I took a vacation in Arizona. While we were there, we visited Sedona, home of those famed red cliffs and mountain views, turquoise blue skies, sacred Native land, and the quiet peace of an uninhabited wilderness. My dear husband is a bargain hunter, so he passed up all the usual big-name motels and booked us a room in a low cost bed and breakfast that was run by some artists who, like us, were veterans of the 1960's peace movement. Yes, the windows and bed were draped in tie-dyed fabric. Yes, the living room walls were lined with books, pottery, and colorful artwork. And yes, the breakfasts were vegetarian and delicious. It was an eclectic place, tucked away on a canyon road. We were only disappointed by two things: an ancient hot tub which did not work, and a host who was a diligent disciple of the power of Sedona's vortexes. Each night, as we returned from our day's hike, our host would ask us, "Did you try a vortex tour?" And then, the man would go on for at least an hour, trying to convince us that we would miss a holy moment if we did not stand in at least one vortex. So one morning we went, we tried to stand in a holy place, and... nothing out of the ordinary happened. As a result, we stayed only two nights at the bed and breakfast. Our host's transfiguration zeal was just too much for us.

Now, here I stand, a diligent disciple of Jesus, trying to witness to you about the Transfiguration of Jesus which took place long ago on a mountain in Syria or Galilee. What's the point of the story, you may ask yourself. Why does the Christian church mark this moment on the mountain as holy?

Perhaps a little church history would help. The transfiguration scene, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a story which unites Jesus' life and ministry with the important figures of Hebrew Scripture. Moses and Elijah, who are the representatives of the Law and the Prophets, appear on the mountain, talking with Jesus. (New Proclamation, 2012, p. 99) What a breathtaking moment that must have been for Peter, James, and John, to see Jesus, in dazzling white, talking to the foremost leaders of Jewish history! And then they must have been astonished to hear a voice from the clouds saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." Awesome. Right before their eyes, the disciples saw Jesus face change. It shone as bright as the sun. Then, they heard the words that would clarify Jesus' identity for them. This was God's son! What a holy moment!

Did the Transfiguration really happen? Scholar N. T. Wright notes that "the story of Jesus' 'transfiguration' . . . seems to have been an actual event. . .

Most of us don't have experiences like this . . ." The transfiguration may seem like a hallucination to us, but Wright asks a telling question: why would the author of Mark have Peter say "let's build a dwelling"? If someone wanted to invent the Transfiguration, that writer would never include Peter's bumbling words in the description of such a holy moment. (Mark for Everyone, N. T. Wright, p. 114) Peter's words are so embarrassing, confused, and full of fear that they had to have been said by our favorite "rock" star of a disciple.

So where is the glory in this story which ends our season of Epiphany? Why do Matthew, Mark, and Luke beg us to stand in the vortex so that we, too, can see the brightness of Jesus' face? Why does the author of Mark place the Transfiguration right on the balance, the tipping point of Jesus' ministry? Let's look there, for at that tipping point, we can learn about Jesus and his definition of glory.

It's painful to read the passages in Mark that lead up to the tipping point of the Transfiguration. Just before Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain, he warns his followers of the future, saying "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." When Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to stop his warnings, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8:31-33)

Then, the Transfiguration takes place. The glory of the Lord shines round about them, but Jesus refuses to revel in his glory. In no time at all, he practically pushes the disciples right back down the mountain. He tells them that there is much work to do, and he orders them to tell no one what they have witnessed. If you continue reading on in Mark, you will notice that Jesus labors at the very human work of healing, teaching, and exorcising demons. He seeks no glory, and laced through his hard work are repeated warnings: the Son of Man will go through many sufferings, he will be treated with contempt, he will be betrayed and killed, and he will rise again. If you look through the Synoptic Gospels, Peter, James and John never speak of the glory on the mountain top to anyone until long after Jesus has died and risen. I believe that they tell no one because they cannot comprehend such a tragic end to Jesus' life and ministry after all the glory they saw up on the mountain.

Beverly Gaventa describes the revelation of God's glory in this way.

"The disciples, in common with many Christians throughout the church's life, want to have the glory that they can see without the message that they must hear, but the two cannot be separated. Over and over Mark lifts up both aspects of Jesus' identity, relentlessly recalling that the suffering will yield to triumph, but the triumph cannot be had without the price of the cross."

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Our buddy Peter talks of building dwelling places because he wants to stay

at the vortex of the Holy and bask in God's glory. But do you notice? Jesus says nothing throughout the whole Transfiguration. When it is over, he just heads down the trail, and symbolically, it's an arduous one. If you've ever climbed a mountain, you know that going down is harder than climbing up. Heading downward, a trail sign might read: "No glory ahead, just blisters." Can't you just hear the disciples muttering, "But what about all that glory we just saw? Why are we headed down into the darkness?" As you may know, the disciples always have questions in Mark's gospel. They stumble many times along the trail, but Jesus never gives up on them. He loves his disciples long and well. He loves them and guides them even when they cannot understand what he asks of them. Sometimes Jesus' patient loving takes an entire lifetime.

A lifetime. A century. A millennium. Hmmm. Could it be that Jesus is patiently asking you and me to follow him? Is God still saying, "This is my Son: listen to him"? We have had our fair share of mountain top experiences here at Lord of Life. Could we possibly be at our own tipping point in the life of this church? Is Jesus challenging us, even today, to follow him down from the mountain? Will we grumble and stumble as we follow him? Probably. I think Jesus wants us to examine his words, "Take up your cross and follow me." What direction do they give to us at this time in the life of our congregation? What more do we need to hear from Jesus so that we can follow him with greater trust and courage?

Maybe you, like I, would rather bask in the glory of the mountain top with Peter. I'm embarrassed to tell you how my husband and I got to the mountain top in Sedona. We rode in a hot pink Jeep to find the holy at a vortex. Pink Jeep rides to the mountain top? That is surreal. If that is the way to transfiguration in Sedona, I can imagine Jesus saying me, "Now are willing to step away from the hot pink Jeep, trudge down the trail with me, and get your hands dirty serving someone else but yourself? Lent is almost upon us. Lent offers us no hot pink Jeep rides; Lent offers prayer-filled walks on rocky trails, trails that lead to a cross. What that cross will mean for us is yet to be seen.

I like the way N. T. Wright pushes me off the mountain top. He writes, "Each of us is called to do what the heavenly voice said: Listen to Jesus because he is God's beloved son. And as we learn to listen, even if sometimes we get scared and say [and do] the wrong things, we may find that glory creeps up on us unawares, strengthening us, as it did the disciples, for the road ahead." (Mark for Everyone, p. 117)