

Sermon Text: Mark 9:2-9

I want to begin with a story that is probably familiar to you. An older brother and a younger sister were outside playing on a beautiful, early spring day. It was a Sunday afternoon, and Susie was swinging back and forth and she was singing over and over and over, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, this little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Johnny, the older brother, got tired of it, and as she swung back one time, he grabbed both chains at the same instant, and held them as she went whoop, and fell out, and skinned up her knees and scratched her face. She went crying to her mother. Johnny was in a lot of trouble. Later that afternoon, the mom noticed that Susie was still sort of pouting around. The scratches weren’t that serious, but she was just in a terrible, terrible mood. The mother asked, “What happened, Susie, what happened to that little light of yours?” She looked up with a pout, and she said, “Johnny put it out!”

This world tends to put out our light. Saints are often painted as having a light about them, a glow about them. It’s portrayed usually as a halo around their head. Dale Bruner, a scholar, shed some light on this. “On that mountain top,” he writes, “what Jesus was within was at once made visible without. It was a preview of the heavenly transfiguration awaiting believers.” You see, the rabbis taught that Adam lost the radiance of his face because of his sin, and that the Messiah would give this radiance back. The Gospel’s transfiguration stories show the beginning of this restoration. In Hebrew, the word is *shekinah*, the glow of God’s presence. Imagine! Jesus glowing so brightly that he outshone the sun in broad daylight. Would you be afraid? I would be, and Peter and James and John were. Matthew’s version says, “He was transfigured before them, and His face, His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.” You know, Celtic Christians speak of thin space. Thin space is where the boundary between this dusty world we live in and the Heavenly realm is so thin that the holiness of God can break through. It’s very often on mountaintops. Have you ever noticed that all cultures and all faiths think of mountains as holy or nearer to God? Even some cultures that are out in the desert or on flat land build mounds. They build ziggurats. They build pyramids in order to have a false mountain, and they attribute that as being somehow nearer to God. So here we are on a mountain. We aren’t sure exactly which one, and the holiness of God shines through Jesus. This is big! It is fearful! It is an awe-inspiring moment! Years later, Peter quoted this amazing happening as a proof in 2 Peter 1:16. He says, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. We heard this voice borne from Heaven for we were with Him on the holy mountain.” In that moment, when it happened, they really had no idea, the disciples, what was going on. He could not comprehend, Peter and James and John, could not comprehend what was going on.

I grew up with Snoopy and Linus and Charlie Brown, and I love that comic strip. I remember one in which Linus and Lucy and Charlie Brown were just lying out on the ground. They were looking at clouds go by. Lucy said, “If you use your imagination, you can see all sorts of formations up there in the clouds. Linus, what do you see?”

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Linus said, “Well, those clouds over there look like a map of British Honduras and the Caribbean, and this group over here looks a little bit like the Stoning of Stephen. There, can you see Saul holding the coats?” Lucy says, “Hmm, very good. Now, what do you see Charlie Brown?” Charlie Brown pauses a long time, and then he said, “I was going to say that I saw a ducky and a horsy, but now I’ve changed my mind.”

Sometimes, we look at the most amazing things, and we don’t realize what we’re seeing. What did they see? What does it mean? The transfiguration is very seldom sung about. It’s very seldom put, I have noticed, in the picture books that we give our children about Bible stories. They don’t know how to picture it. We don’t know what to do with it. Some people don’t believe that it even happened, but Matthew and Mark and Luke have the same story. John begins with that same theology of Jesus as God in flesh, as the true light in the darkness in this world. John comforts us in his Gospel, and he also warns us by saying that Jesus is the light, which the darkness cannot put out, but it will try.

A story is told of a man who got a permit to open the first tavern in a very small, formerly dry town. The members of the local church were very opposed to this tavern opening up so they began to pray publicly that God would intervene, and God didn’t. They got their permit, and they were ready to open, and a few days before it opened, a storm came along, and lightning hit the tavern, and it burned to the ground. Now, the people of the church were surprised, but they were pleased until they received notice by the tavern owner’s lawyer that he was suing the people of the church. He contended that their prayers were responsible for the burning of the building. Now, in a strongly worded deposition, the church and their lawyer denied the charge, denied any responsibility. At the conclusion of the hearing, the judge wryly remarked, “At this point, I don’t know what my decision will be, but here’s where we appear to be. Number one, the tavern owner believes in the power of prayer, and the people of the church do not. Now, does the church believe in the power of God or not?”

I am asking you this morning to take this transfiguration story at face value, at Jesus’ face shining brighter than the sun value. What does that mean to your faith? It was just a glimpse, just a glimpse of the glory and the otherness of God. Have you never had such a small glimpse or something along those lines? I hope that you have. It is enough, even a small glimpse. Something happened on that mountaintop, something that made no sense at the time, but sustained them later on. Jesus, whose glory filled the skies, became brighter than the sun, and there with him was Moses the lawgiver. It looks like Moses finally made it to the Promised Land. Also, the prophet and reformer Elijah appeared, and they were holding a meeting right there on the mountain top in front of Peter and James and John, and they were terrified out of their wits. This gives me fear even today; fear that even in the afterlife, there may be meetings! Anyway, poor impulsive thickheaded Peter, he thought this vision had not come to pass, but had come to stay, and he offered to build some shelters to stay in. He said, “Let’s not go into Jerusalem. Who knows whether they will welcome us or not. Let’s just stay here on the mountain top.”

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In an unpublished sermon, Will Willimon says Peter wanted to fix that transfiguring mountaintop moment in concrete. He wanted to set it in epoxy for all time, but we can't. Glimpses like that come and they go. In God's continual flirtation with the world, only rarely does God bowl us over or write some slogan across the sky in neon. More often, God quietly courts us and pulls back the curtain for a peak, and when such a glimpse is given to you on a mountaintop in Judea or of all unlikely places in Main Street Church, cherish it. Don't even try to capture it for it is a gift, a glimpse, a fleeting blessed gift of revelation. You don't get to stay on mountaintops. That's not the kind of world that we live in and that's not the kind of faith that we live out. Our faith here in the dark comes with fear and trembling and sometimes doubts to overcome. Mountaintop dreams and visions – close encounters with God – are for strengthening you and me to face the dark moments ahead, and here is the bad news. Every single one of us has dark moments ahead, every life and every thing. You can't stay on a high forever. On a physical level, you can ask any compulsive shopper or compulsive gambler or serial adulterer or substance abuser, you can't stay on a high forever. Life edges in, and highs cannot be sustained no matter the cost or the number or the dosage. Mountaintops are rare. Valleys and deserts and plains are the norm. Remember this mountaintop vision was just before mounting conflict with church officials, which led to Jesus' arrest and then the cross. The disciples needed this vision, and we need it, too. We need it, too. We need to know and see in our heart and soul that Jesus is God in flesh, erasing the darkness, even erasing the dim stuff that we mistake for light. He can and did overcome fear and sin and death, and He is above and beyond the law and prophets. His grace, His love and forgiveness and eternal hope trump what the Law of Moses could ever do. His opening the door of Heaven and cleansing us by His own perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world does more than any prophet could do. He did not give the law, He fulfilled it. He lived it. He loved God completely and He loved His neighbor completely, and He was obedient even unto death. As God's voice said to the trembling disciples lying there on the ground, “This is my beloved son, listen to Him,” and poof, there was no Moses, and poof, there was no Elijah. They saw Jesus only, Jesus alone. Moses on Sinai was also encompassed by a cloud and was in God's presence so he was infused with God's shekinah, God's light and glory, and so you may remember and you may not, that when he came down the mountain, Moss's face glowed from that encounter, and he had to wear a veil to keep from scaring people. It's in your Bible. I know some of you don't believe me. You're going to go look that up.

The children of Israel were led into the wilderness by a pillar of fire by night, and even we, in Heaven, are said to glow with God's holy light. In Matthew 13:43, it says, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun.” In Heaven, the righteous will shine like the sun, in the kingdom of their Father; he has ears, let him hear. Imagine some day, some eternal day, shining like the sun. You also may have noticed in the Gospel of John, excuse me; not in the Gospel, but in the Revelation of John, it describes the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, as having no sun, no moon, and no need of it. Listen to Revelations 21, “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the lamb.” Children of God do not fear! Even though the cross is coming, darkness is coming, the glorified God-filled, God-in fleshed Savior's light

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cannot be put out! God wins in the end. This is the message of the New Testament. I don't know what darkness assails each and every one of you right now. I don't know what darkness you are dwelling in or struggling with, but there's a word that we could all use, and it is this, God wins in the end! Christ whose glory filled the skies will hold you. Fear not! When the disciples come to the end of their mountaintop experience, they do look up and see only Jesus, no dazzling light, no Moses, no Elijah, no bright cloud, no dark cloud, no heavenly thunder, just Jesus humanly standing there in front of them. The transfiguration gave them a peek, a glimpse, and I do hope you have had something along those lines. Christ is more than teacher, more than man, more than a cultural icon. Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, God with us. That is what Peter and James and John saw, God with us in Christ.

The author, Robert Fulghum, frequently attends seminars and lectures, and has a sort of joke that he always does. You know how the lecturer at the end of a talk will ask a rhetorical question, hopefully rhetorical, “Are there any questions?” He and the entire audience hope that there are no questions. Well, Fulghum says, always, he asks what is the meaning of life, and that's his joke, and everybody laughs, and then he tells a second joke, and that is he'd hate not to know simply because he did not ask, and everybody laughs a little bit again. Well, Fulghum was attending a lecture by a Greek man named Alexander Popaderos, and he asked his question at the end, what is the meaning of life, and when he did, Popaderos reached into his pocket, and he pulled out a small mirror, and he showed what he could with that mirror, reflecting light all around with it. He explained that he had found this small mirror when he was a child, and he used it as a toy. He became fascinated by the fact that he could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine, into deep holes and caves and closets, places the sun never reached. As he grew up, he explained that it was more than a game; it became a metaphor for what we are to do with our lives. The church and civic organizations and even governments must recognize that we are not the light nor the source of light, but light and truth and understanding and wisdom in God is here, and that light, that light will only shine in dark places when we reflect it. This, claimed Popaderos, is the meaning of life. As Christians, we are to reflect the light of the Holy, the experience of God's love and grace with which we have been blessed, and reflect that onto others, directly or indirectly in whatever way we can. That is why we are sometimes blessed with experiences of the Holy, experiences of grace, to enable and to sustain and to strengthen our own personal ministries. While we are on the plain or while we walk in the valley where it is often hard to discern God's presence. We live by the spirit, in the afterglow of His love, His majesty, His mercy, and His grace. After the vision, then the cloud came, and then the voice, and they were exceedingly afraid, and a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him.” Suddenly looking around, no longer did they see anyone with them but Jesus only, but Jesus alone. Fear not! Jesus overcame death and sin and judgment on your behalf. Fear not! Feel the warmth and the glow of His love and presence, and reflect it into all the dark corners of the world. This is our – yours and my individual – ministry to do. Amen.