

**“Seeing Jesus as He Really Is and
Ourselves as We Are Meant to Be”**

Mark 9:2-10; 2 Cor. 4:3-6

First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn

The Rev. Frederick H. Woodward February 19, 2012

Mark 9:2-10 (NIV)

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters-- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

2 Cor. 4:3-6 (NIV)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

“Seeing Jesus as He Really Is and Ourselves as We Are Meant to Be”

“I’ve looked at clouds from both sides now/from up and down and still somehow/it’s cloud’s illusions I recall/I really don’t know clouds at all.”

Joni Mitchell wrote those words, Judy Collins most famously sung them, but they are words right out of the disciples’ playbook. At the transfiguration, Peter, James and John saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. After some nervous words on Peter’s part, they saw a cloud envelope them, and they heard a voice from the cloud saying, “this is my Son whom I love. Listen to him!” Although those words echoed earlier words from their holy scriptures (Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1) and recalled the voice from heaven that spoke at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:11), at this point in the Gospel story, the disciples really did not know clouds at all.

In our Bible, clouds serve both manifest and conceal the presence of God. In Exodus, the glory of the Lord appeared in a cloud in the wilderness (Ex. 16:10). The Lord also came in a dense cloud to on Mount Sinai where he met Moses and delivered the words of the law (19:9, 19:16ff.). And the prophet Daniel foresaw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13).

Clouds are also associated with the manifestation of God in the NT. Luke tells us that Jesus was taken up in a cloud at his ascension (Acts 1:9) and that Jesus had promised to return to the world in a cloud with power and great glory (Luke 21:27; cf. Rev. 1:7; 14:4). In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul promised that when Christ returned, he would meet in the clouds with both those who had died in Christ and those who were alive in Christ when the trumpet sounded (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

But at this point in the Gospel story, the disciples really didn't know clouds at all. And they wouldn't really know until after the resurrection. Only then would they grasp the true significance of what Jesus had said and done while he was with them. Only then would they perceive the depths to which God would go to redeem God's people.

When I was in law enforcement and we were instructed in tactical building entry, we were trained in "quick peeks." For the disciples, the transfiguration was a quick peek around the corner of faith. It gave them a glimpse of Jesus' true significance, a glimpse of who Jesus really was. Near the center of Mark's Gospel, the transfiguration bridged Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee with his journey to Jerusalem. It looked back to Jesus' baptism and ahead to the cross at Golgotha, and far beyond that to the resurrection and ascension of our Lord.

But what does the transfiguration mean to us today? What meaning, if any, does the transfiguration continue to have for our contemporary faith? The brief answer that I will propose this morning is that the transfiguration helps us to see Jesus Christ as he really is and ourselves as we are meant to be. For the transfiguration helps us to see ourselves in the light of Christ who in that light images God.

But let's start with the question, how does the transfiguration help us to see Jesus as he really is?

You have heard the expression, "seeing someone's true colors." We typically use that expression in a negative sense of those who disappoint us or of those whose true motivations are finally exposed. But at the transfiguration, if only for a moment, the disciples saw Jesus' true colors – but then in a positive sense. The way Mark put it is that Jesus' "clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). It would take the resurrection, the ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost before the disciples would fully grasp Jesus in his glory, as he really was. But at the transfiguration, the disciples got a glimpse of Jesus' true colors.

To see Jesus as he really is is to see that he images God; it is to see him both in continuity and discontinuity with Israel's historical faith. The continuity part comes with the disciples seeing Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah, the representatives of both Israel's law and prophets. The discontinuity part has to do with Jesus' utter uniqueness. Although Peter had trouble grasping it, Moses, Elijah and Jesus are never really three peas in a pod. Theirs was not and is not a relationship among peers or equals. Though he stood briefly in the company of Moses and Elijah, Jesus was the last man standing. And that leads me to conclude that the transfiguration had as much to do with the vanishing of Moses and Elijah on that mountain as with their appearing there with Jesus in the first

place. But it would take the voice of God to remind the disciples that Jesus alone was the beloved Son to whom they and we should hear, listen and obey.

But that doesn't mean that listening and obeying Jesus would come easy for them or for us. One of the things that it was particularly difficult for the disciples to hear and accept was Jesus' own understanding of his messianic identity, that he was to be killed and raised from death. When Jesus had declared that to his disciples before the transfiguration, Peter made it abundantly clear that that was not the sort of Savior he had in mind. That was partly because a crucified Messiah was simply a contradiction in terms and partly because the disciples wanted to bottle Jesus' power and draw from it at will. But Jesus would not be turned away from his mission from God and therefore reprimanded Peter in the strongest possible terms for his devilish suggestion that he either could or should abandon the mission given him by God (Mark 8:33).

I spent a summer once as a hut custodian in the Canadian Rockies for the Alpine Club of Canada. My job was to maintain the huts or lodges used by hikers who scrambled up the mountain peaks near Lake Louise and Banff. What a summer that was! In the mountains you see things differently than you do in the valleys. You get a longer view of the world and it is hard to resist the conclusion that you are seeing the world as it is intended to be seen in all its splendor and wonder.

The view of Jesus that the disciples had on the mountain was different from the view of Jesus that they had down below in the valley. Down below Jesus' unique relationship with God the Father was far from transparent. Down below Jesus was misunderstood by everyone, even his closest disciples. Down below Jesus encountered the persistence of unbelief, the unwillingness to fully trust in the one who had come to save them. But on the mountain, Jesus was briefly seen for what he was, the beloved Son of God, the one who revealed and imaged who God was, the one who had come that we might truly know love and life.

But that leads to the question, how does the transfiguration help us to see ourselves as we really are? How does the transfiguration shape our own self-understanding as Christians in what some have described as a post-Christian age?

Well, the transfiguration shapes our self-understanding because on the mount of transfiguration, we see ourselves in the light of Christ. In the valley below, we misperceive both God and ourselves. Down in the valley, we see ourselves in all our brokenness apart from Christ. In the valley, we see the stresses that misshape us, the conflicts that unsettle us, the obstacles that get in the way of our living lives of hope and joy, and we do not see ourselves in the illuminating light of Christ. But from the mountain of transfiguration, we see ourselves as God's beloved and cherished children, redeemed for life in Christ's name. On the mountain it is as if we ourselves had been transfigured, as if we too were arrayed in glistening white garments, though in our case, those garments are not the resplendent robes of divinity, but baptismal gowns far more appropriate to our humbled humanity. On the mountain of transfiguration and by virtue of our baptism, we re-perceive who we are. As we see ourselves in relationship with God the Father through Jesus the Son, we discover meaning and purpose in our lives that in the valley sometimes seem threatened altogether by chaos.

But just as it is hard to see Jesus as he really is, it is hard to consistently see ourselves as we really are, and as we are really meant to be. Sometimes we simply cannot take the long view of ourselves. Often it is our lot to live in the valley where our commitments and preoccupations tend to disrupt our ability to behold ourselves as God sees us, and where our pain and our suffering cloud both God's glory and our own sacredness as creatures of God.

And truth be told, the transfiguration didn't change much for the disciples. They continued to see Jesus from a human point of view and continued to go along afterwards as if nothing decisive had happened. After all it was after, not before the transfiguration, that the disciples entered into calculations as to who among them was the greatest (9:34). And it was after the transfiguration that the disciples in their fear became Jesus' betrayers. The disciples simply would not know love or life at all until after the resurrection.

But why not? Shouldn't the disciples' experience of Jesus' unique relationship with God the Father on that mountaintop have been enough to change them irrevocably? All we can say is that it did not, not until after the resurrection. Yes, the disciples got a glimpse, a quick peek, but once they were back in the valley, what they saw escaped them. And it is it very different today for us today.

Jesus' unique relationship with God the Father is simply not evident without the eyes of faith. Jesus' divinity is simply not the sort of truth that is available to the general public. And even when we glimpse Jesus as he really is, it cannot compel our trust in him. As Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim once put it, "true human life is possible only if the vision of God is of such a nature that disbelief remains possible."

Because we live most of our lives in the valley, glimpsing Jesus' divinity on the mount of transfiguration simply does not change everything for us. Our encounter with the divine does not relieve us from the conditions of being human; it does not spare us our experience of limitation, loss, suffering, or sin.

But if glimpsing Jesus' divinity does not change everything, it changes enough. It reminds us that in our journey with Jesus we really are going somewhere, and that our journey with him has real meaning and purpose. It reminds us that even as Jesus was transfigured, we ourselves are being transformed. As Paul puts it, "and we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Paul isn't saying here that we have to work at our own transformation, but that by God's grace we are in fact being transformed. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

But that means that it's not really quite true as Joni famously wrote and Judy famously sung that do not really know clouds, really do not know love, really do not know life at all.

We do not know everything, but because of the transfiguring grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ, we know enough. For the transfiguration helps us glimpse Jesus Christ as he really is and ourselves as we are meant to be. The transfiguration helps us to see ourselves in the light of Jesus the Christ who images God the Father.

So let us live into our calling. To God be the glory.