

**“Leaving Room for Mystery”**  
**Mark 9:2-9**  
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It is a familiar story. It shows up in the lectionary every year and thus the lectionary preacher has an annual opportunity to preach on it, except for those years when it snows on this Sunday, which it does quite often. But we know this story of transfiguration. It seems pretty straightforward, even with all the pyrotechnics and mystical elements. So, we may feel like we know all there is to know here, not that this has ever stopped a preacher from plowing ahead anyway...

But the truth is this story is not as straightforward as it seems. It is filled with mystery, paradox and ambiguity. It is an apocalyptic story, in that its intent is to reveal things. But it is clouded, literally, and full of mystery. It is a story designed to disclose Jesus’ identity as God’s beloved Son. This happens three times in Mark – at Jesus’ baptism, here and at Jesus’ death. But now that the disciples know who Jesus is, they are ordered to tell no one, at least until after his resurrection. And it is a story about an experience intended to encourage the disciples to listen to Jesus, but do they listen to him any better after this experience?

We might think the disciples listen. They have left all to follow Jesus. But they do not listen any better than we do. We listen when we like Jesus’ teachings and tune him out when we do not, when he says things like “love your enemies” and “forgive those who hurt you” and “welcome the stranger” and “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples struggle to hear Jesus’ more challenging words like just before this reading when he predicts his suffering and death and Peter gets in his face and says, “No way!” only to have Jesus rebuke him and then go on to say that his disciples must deny self, take up a cross and follow him. They struggle just like us.

So, in this story, they have a transformative encounter with the Holy One who says to them from a cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved;

listen to him!” Listen to him - this is the point, but they don’t listen to him any better after this experience than they did before.

We don’t even know exactly where this story takes place or when. Is it Mount Hermon or Mount Tabor or some other mount? And does this happen when it seems to in the Gospel accounts or is this some kind of post-resurrection flashback? It just isn’t clear.

So, while this story may appear to be straightforward, it is nothing of the kind. While we may think we have extracted every possible meaning from the story, it is highly unlikely that we have. If we are not careful, we might end up like Peter, speaking before we know what to say, babbling about things we do not understand.

Perhaps simply acknowledging this reality is the place to begin. That is, with stories like this, we need to leave room for mystery. We need to acknowledge from the outset that while there are things we can understand, there are also elements of complexity and ambiguity that defy comprehension - like whether Moses and Elijah are really there, like what the voice from the cloud sounds like, like whether this is an actual experience on a literal mountain or a mystical experience in the minds of Peter, James and John. Identifying issues like these doesn’t mean we are questioning the truthfulness of the story. It simply means we are wondering in what sense it is true.

There is a scene near the end of the last Harry Potter film where Harry asks Dumbledore if his conversation with him is real or just in his head. Dumbledore replies, “Of course, it’s happening inside your head, Harry! Why should that mean that it’s not real?” Indeed. No matter how we answer certain questions about the text, it doesn’t deny its truthfulness. It just says there is a good bit of mystery here.

We may think we want simple answers from religion. We have a difficult decision to make. What is the correct decision? People are saying different things about some issue. What is the correct position? Is there really a God, what is God like and how and where do we meet God? Why is there so much suffering and evil in the world if God is in control? We want answers; simple, direct answers. We don’t want complexity and ambiguity; we don’t want mystery and evasion.

Yet, how does Jesus respond to questions? Usually with more questions! And while we may not want complexity, life is complicated, faith is complicated, Jesus is complicated. Just consider the basic claim of the church that he is both human and divine. Anyone who professes to fully understand this claim clearly does not know what it is.

In matters of faith, we are talking about encounters with God, and any God we can fully understand is too small to help us, any God we can fully understand is too small to be God. This is the case with the disciples' experience of transfiguration, and this is the case with our experiences of transfiguration, those experiences in which we encounter God, and in the process, learn something new about God, Christ, others and ourselves.

What experiences are we talking about? Well, for most of us, baptism is a transfiguration experience, a mystical encounter with the Holy which changes our lives. There are things we can understand about baptism. We offer our testimony of faith and make a commitment to follow Jesus. We do this in water, in Baptist life by being immersed as a symbol of cleansing and full commitment to a new way of life. We light a candle as a symbol of our new life in Christ, and we do all of this not alone, but with the church family present, because while baptism is a very personal matter, it is also a matter that involves the community. None of us comes to faith alone and how we live affects others.

All of this we can understand, but there are aspects of baptism which defy understanding. Baptism is not only our testimony of faith. It is also an expression of God's love for us. And in baptism we sense the presence of God in ways we cannot explain. There is no magic in the water. There is just something about the sacred ritual, the presence of people who love us and the knowledge that millions of believers have come before us in these waters that makes us sense God's nearness.

I was seventeen when I was baptized. I was not raised in the church, as most of you know, but was invited to a youth group when I was fifteen. There I made friends and learned about Jesus not only by reading the Bible, but by spending time with some of his followers. By the time I got to the water, I was clear about my conviction, about what I was saying to God. But in the water, I was much more aware of what

God was saying to me in the way of love and affirmation. I have sensed this every time I have baptized. It is what Jesus experienced in his baptism. It cannot help but transform us to know that we are so loved.

I have also had transfiguration experiences on mountaintops, like Peter, James and John, as I suspect many of you have. One experience took place running on Beech Mountain. As I neared the top and a few endorphins kicked in, a cloud moved through the area such that, given the altitude, I was running through the cloud. I did not hear a voice, and neither Moses nor Elijah showed up, though I did encounter the Tin Man, as I was running through what used to be the Land of Oz theme park... but I had this inner sense of awe and mystery, of not being alone.

I had a similar experience in Kenya several years ago. We had finished work on a suspension bridge in Sisit, worshiped with new friends and learned about partnership work. We had a day and half on the Mara, over 5,000 feet up, but it is a plane, so only your shortness of breath lets you know you are on a mountain. We had a wonderful day. We saw the incredible diversity of life one finds in many parts of the massive and majestic continent of Africa. We saw several lions much closer up that we should have, thanks to our courageous/foolish driver.

Now, we were leaving. The sun was setting in a majestic way. Bob Page took a picture of it which captures a glimpse of the majesty. And in the moment, weary from our work, thankful for new friendships and simply overwhelmed by the sunset, we were moved to awe and transformed. The earth was transfigured first, then we were. Surely you have had moments like this, moments when you realized you were not alone, moments of awe evoked by the wonder of creation. You cannot explain them, they are shrouded in mystery, but they are transforming.

But transfiguration experiences don't just take place on mountaintops, physical or spiritual. They also take place in contexts of struggle, in ordinary moments of life, in times of study and worship, fellowship and play, even while attending films and concerts. Anything that evokes an awareness of the Holy and helps us grow in our understanding of God, Christ, others or ourselves is transfiguring.

I sensed God's nearness while visiting a church member in the hospital years ago in another setting. After spending some time with this

dear friend who was dying, I offered a prayer, and just before I said amen, he offered a few words of prayer, and after he prayed, his wife joined in. I don't remember the words. I just remember a feeling of peace, of being surrounded by love, of knowing we were not alone.

I sensed God's nearness when the Iyokos led us in worship in December with many members of the Swahili-speaking church being here. I can't say exactly why. Their story of faith in the midst of terrible suffering was inspiring, their music was uplifting, their proclamation was challenging (and I didn't have to preach!), but for reasons I cannot fully explain, it was a transfiguration moment.

I've even sensed God's nearness at a U2 concert, in texts which address ordinary human realities as well as justice concerns, in the community of people who gathered to share the music. Transfiguration can take place anywhere we become more aware of the Holy, and in the process, learn something more about God, Christ, others and ourselves.

I realize this may feel too open-ended. If any of us can encounter God anywhere or at least think we have and come away with some new wisdom, isn't there some risk of confusion, some possibility that we may experience different things and thus claim conflicting things about God?

Yes, there is. In fact, it happens all the time. People claim to have a word from God about all sorts of things that others find alien to the character of God as revealed Christ. And this, I think, is the key in our reflection upon transfiguration experiences. Do they square with what we know of the character of God as revealed in Christ?

Many years ago a Jewish friend was talking about the diversity of belief in Judaism and how if you ask three rabbis for an opinion on a subject, you will get three opinions. "So, any answer is acceptable?" someone asked. "No," said the Jewish friend, there are boundaries. He went on to use an analogy his rabbi developed, saying you can buy many different things for many different meals at a grocery store. You have many options for meals and ingredients, but you do have to shop in a grocery store. You cannot go to the hardware store to buy ingredients.

It is a helpful analogy for Christian faith. We too have options on many questions of faith. God is more than any human understanding.

So, there is an element of mystery to our encounters with the Holy. We are always learning more about God and ourselves. But there are boundaries to our understanding. Perhaps better put, there is a standard by which to assess our experience - the character of Christ.

Writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul says that while many aspects of our faith may be veiled, especially to those who do not believe, God reveals the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:3-6) . In Christ, we see the character of God. So anything we claim to experience should square with what we already know in him. He is our grocery store in which to acquire ingredients for a meal of understanding of the Holy. And while many aspects of God are mysterious, there is much in Jesus' life that seems pretty clear.

If God is like him, God is overflowing with kindness and compassion. If God is like him, God is constantly extending the boundaries of the covenant community; reaching out to the marginalized; forgiving sinners; transcending differences of race, gender, nationality and even past faith experience. If God is like him, sacrifice and service are noble paths and humility is a sign of strength. If God is like him, love is the most powerful force in world.

Yet, even when it comes to the character of Christ, there is an element of mystery, there is ever more to learn. Albert Schweitzer put it this way.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

In the end, that's what we are about – learning who Christ is in our experience which is full of mystery and clarity. We just need to leave room for the mystery.