

## **Mark 9:2-9 (NET)**

### *The Transfiguration*

<sup>9:2</sup> Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John and led them alone up a high mountain privately. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>9:3</sup> and his clothes became radiantly white, more so than any launderer in the world could bleach them. <sup>9:4</sup> Then Elijah appeared before them along with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. <sup>9:5</sup> So Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three shelters – one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>9:6</sup> (For they were afraid, and he did not know what to say.) <sup>9:7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came from the cloud, “This is my one dear Son. Listen to him!” <sup>9:8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more except Jesus.

<sup>9:9</sup> As they were coming down from the mountain, he gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

## Catching a Glimpse

A sermon preached at The United Church of Christ of North Hampton, NH

Date: February 22, 2009

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Mark 9:2-9

John walked down the sidewalk some years ago on New England autumn day. It would be an understatement to say that John's life was a wreck. He had discovered only a few months before, to his total surprise, that his wife of fifteen years was leaving him. Whenever John had been asked to describe himself he had always said first and foremost that he was a family man. His wife and two children were the center of his life. Then, one day, the closets were empty and there was a two-sentence note on the kitchen table. Suddenly the core of his identity had been pulled out from under him. The story he had told himself about himself lay on the ground, a shattered fiction. Just existing was full of effort. Most days he felt as though he were suffocating in a dense fog, or drifting alone in a sargasso sea. To put one step in front of another, to put a meal on the table for the children, to get dressed for work seemed utterly overwhelming. From a world that made sense, John was thrown into a world in which even the most simple rules of arithmetic didn't add up.

But this autumn day, something broke free. The fog lifted, the surroundings regained their crisp colors. His step was light. And for no reason that he could explain a sense of well-being flooded over John. He walked down the sidewalk with every trouble still in place, and he, nonetheless, could reach out and touch contentment and hope. They were that present, that concrete.

Jane sat on the couch in her livingroom. The last few days had been a blur. In an instant she had gone from wife to widow. But before she could begin to get her mind around the meaning of that reality, there appeared before a million things to keep her busy. Maybe that was their purpose. Maybe it was better to be busy at first. And so it was. Arrangements. Burial clothes. Telephone calls. Newspaper notices. Plan the service. The doorbell ringing. Emotional embraces. Casseroles and finger rolls. Visiting hours. The service. The interment. And then by nightfall the activity and the people had evaporated like a drifting smoke. For the first time in days she was alone with herself on the couch in the livingroom where a life together had such a short time ago been in progress.

Sadness came in waves, each time taking her breath away. Memories would arise, but each one was a betrayer, for it turned quickly to a searing rod that burned her flesh. At a depth she had never known she experienced aloneness. But then, just for a moment, it was as though she was held in the arms of God. For a moment she felt comfort equal and opposite to her just-experienced loneliness. It caught Jane quite by surprise. And then it fled.

Have you ever had an experience anything like John or Jane's? I don't mean, necessarily, the exact kind of loss they experienced, though some of you may have. But have you ever had the rug pulled out from under you? Maybe you didn't get into the college you had your heart set on. Or maybe you got laid off from a company you had given your heart and soul to. Maybe a child has gone down a road that has left you weeping, vacillating between blaming

yourself and anger that you didn't deserve this to happen. Or maybe you can't point to one single thing, or maybe to anything at all, but nonetheless, a sense of depression and malaise just won't let you go. What I am asking is simply, has it ever been hard for you? I imagine that it has for almost all of us. But if it's never been hard for you, I apologize, because this sermon may not speak very well to you.

But if it has ever been hard for you, have you ever, like John and Jane, felt right in the midst of it all, a moment of unexplainable relief? In the midst of a storm, have you ever seen the sun break through? In a cold winter of discontent, have you ever experienced a moment of warmth course through your veins? In a time when nothing was going right, have you ever experienced a momentary flash that let you feel, even if just for an instant, I can live with this? That is, have you ever caught a glimpse, a sneak preview of something better and more whole than what you are living in the midst of?

If you have, then you have experienced something very akin to the transfiguration, which Peter, James and John experienced that day on the mountain with Jesus.

In Jesus' time it was believed that the righteous would receive new, glorified bodies in order to enter into heaven. On the mountain, then, Peter James and John got a preview of Jesus' glorification. They got a preview of the truth that was announced at Jesus' baptism – This is my son, with whom I am well pleased – and which would be brought to completion in the Jesus' resurrection. Peter, James and John got a glimpse of a reality that still lay before them in the future.

And look where this event sits in the Gospel narrative. For most of the first eight chapters of Mark things go pretty smoothly. Jesus heals people of any number of illnesses. He easily bests his opponents in disputation. Even the evil spirits recognize him as the Son of God and obey his commands.

Then Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answer, you may recall, some say Elijah, some say John the Baptist, some say one of the prophets. Then Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" At that point Peter proudly announces, "You are the Christ." Things are still moving along just splendidly.

But then Jesus says, That's right. Don't tell anyone. And Oh, by the way, what this means, what it means to be the Christ, is that I will suffer many things, be rejected, killed and then rise from the dead.

Peter, who at this point sees himself as Jesus' handler or campaign manager, pulls Jesus aside. Whoa, whoa there Jesus. Don't be saying things like that, man. That kind of campaign's never going to sell. You've seen the polls. We want a winner, an optimist. Man, if the New York Times hears that you're talking about suffering, rejection and execution, they'll have you for lunch.

Famously, Jesus responds to Peter, "Get behind me Satan. You're not focusing on God's interests." Then Jesus goes on to say that to follow him you must take up your cross and that you must lose your life to save it.

Immediately following this interchange comes the Transfiguration Story we read this morning. And then almost immediately Jesus tells the disciples again, I must suffer, be rejected and killed and then raised from the dead. This time the disciples, we're told, didn't understand, but they were afraid to ask. After what happened to Peter, who could blame them?

Anyway, our story of the Transfiguration, the glimpse of glory, sits sandwiched between

these two depressing predictions of what Jesus says is in store for him. In that sense, like John and Jane that I talked of at the beginning, the disciples get a small respite, a bit of relief in the midst of a very difficult and troubling turn of events. Completely thrown off what they were expecting from Jesus, completely confused, afraid even to ask for an explanation, they get a small breather.

Now, if that were the end of it, it would be something I suppose. Those of us who have experienced a momentary lightening of the load in difficult times have probably appreciated the break. But for the disciples, and I want to say for us, that just scratches the surface of what those moments do for them and us.

Jesus' greatest fear, it seems, is that his followers will see his supernatural powers to be his greatest feature. Even more to the point, Jesus' greatest fear is that his followers will think that by following him every disease will be cured, every hardship overcome, every opponent beaten, and every desire we have be fulfilled. That's one of the reasons Jesus so often tells the witnesses to his miracles not to tell anybody. He's worried sick that they'll spread around the idea that if you go see this guy out in the wilderness of the Galilee, he'll give you anything you need, maybe even anything you want.

Jesus fears this reputation for three very good reasons. First, as important as the healings are, they aren't the point of the Gospel. Second, the idea that the Gospel is about controlling life also misses the point. That's Caesar, not the Gospel. And third, and most important, it's just not going to work out that way for him or for us. If there's going to be any good news in this story, it is going to be good news that manages to address us, to stand beside us, to hold us, to restore us and to make us whole even as we struggle in this life, and even as we continue to do so.

The transfiguration is a glimpse into a reality that is in some sense already but not yet. The glimpse is real. It is a true moment in the present. Jesus is the son of God, now. In that sense, he is already glorified. But, just as it is true for us, his struggle continues for now. Neither his nor our struggle is not over yet.

So, the Transfiguration, as is the Gospel itself, is meant for our consolation. They both give us a light at the end of what can be some pretty dark tunnels. The Transfiguration is also for our instruction. When God appears at the Transfiguration in the cloud, when God speaks in that moment, God doesn't say, "Hey guys, look what I did here. Made these guys all glowing and white." No, God said, "This is my dear son. Listen to him." God said, "Listen to him." Not, "Look at him," but, "Listen to him."

In a very real sense Jesus is going to spend the rest of his ministry trying to teach his followers that the ways of the world are not the ways of the Kingdom of God. This is hard lesson for his disciples, just as it is for Jesus' followers today. Jesus' disciples wanted to be winners. Later James and John will ask for the best seats in glory, but Jesus will teach them that they are not to seek the places of honor at the banquet. They want to be recognized and respected, and Jesus teaches them not to pray like the big shots. And the people Jesus eats with and talks to are an embarrassment to the disciples. They want gain in this life, and Jesus teaches them that they must lose their life to gain it. They want a strong leader, a prophet, one sent from God in a flaming chariot to do battle with the world's powers, and he gives them a leader who, just as he said he would, suffers and goes to the cross and tells them to put their swords away.

In almost every conceivable way Jesus frustrated what the disciples wanted and expected from him. Except for one thing. Except for one thing. That glorification, that Transfiguration,

that sneak preview on the mountain, well that was true. The only trouble was that the path to it was quite different from what they had anticipated. Not only was the Transfiguration true, but it was also a centerpiece in the lesson plan for Jesus' teaching mission. For he hoped that one day, after they had all been to hell and back, that glowing moment, sitting between his two dire predictions of how it would all come down, would help them grasp that true wholeness and well-being could not come the way they had hoped, but more important, that it surely would come even if they walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

In a sense this was the same glimpse that John and Jane got in the midst of their sorrow. A double promise. An already but not yet. A now and a coming. For now, in the hard times, we are not alone. And now, in the normal times, we can begin our own transfiguration, leaving Caesar's ways behind and embracing, instead, the ways Jesus teaches. And then, when rather than looking through a glass dimly we see face to face, then, we shall know wholeness that shines brighter than any launderer in the world could bleach it. Thanks be to God. Amen.