

Mark 9:2–9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

## The Glory of the Cross

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: February 19, 2012 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

I want to start with a story this morning, one that is very familiar to us in this church.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. (Luke 24:13–21a (NRSV))

The disciples’ disappointment is palpable. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel,” they said. But now, they are leaving Jerusalem with their tails between their legs. Family and friends would shake their heads. “We told you you were fools. The one to redeem Israel? Right.”

They knew they were fools, of course. In their own minds they knew they were, or at least they had been until now. Thursday and Friday had made their foolishness abundantly clear. When they spit on your hope, when your hope cries out from the cross, when your hope is buried in the tomb, you know your hope was foolish. At first his followers hid and licked their wounds. They didn’t even show up to bury their hope. They let Joseph of Arimathea take him down and lay him in a tomb. And now they were leaving town. They were wiser now. When your hope dies on a cross you get wise in a hurry. Admitting your defeat and foolishness is, after all, a certain kind of wisdom.

There had been other days, when their hope seemed possible, but no longer were those days meaningful. Now the memory made them ache with shame and woe.

He led Peter, James and John up a mountain. Suddenly he glowed before them. Next to him stood Moses and Elijah. Oh yes, those were the halcyon days, heady days when visions foretold successes to come. Then, they had thought he was a prophet, mighty in deed and word. There before Peter, James and John stood Jesus, Moses and Elijah. There standing with him were two of the greatest prophets in Israel’s history. Who could miss the meaning?

Take Elijah. Remember when King Ahab married Jezebel and took up with her pagan God? Remember how Ahab forsook the one true God and began to set up shrines to Baal all over the place? Remember how Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a duel, of sorts.

Let two bulls be given to us; let [the prophets of Baal] choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” All the people answered, “Well spoken!” ... So [the prophets of Baal] took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called

on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. ... Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob; ... with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar ... Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there. (1 Kings 18:23-40)

\*\*\* Up there on the mountain Peter, James and John could hardly miss the meaning. There, along with Jesus, stood the likes of Moses and Elijah. The former had led Israel out of Egypt, the latter of had called down the fire of God, vanquished the prophets of Baal and put every one of them to death in the river Kishon. Peter, James and John knew that this was their inheritance.

\*\*\* Of course, walking out from Jerusalem that Sunday after they crucified him, after it had all ended when their hope suffocated under its own weight, the visions of success were laughable. The might of Caesar and his cronies had easily executed their hope and exposed their foolishness.

\*\*\* Up there on the mountain Jesus had told Peter, James and John not to tell anyone what they had seen, which they didn't except for the inner circle. It was just as well they had kept it quiet. They looked silly enough without everyone taunting them. "Tell us again," they would hear. "Tell us about Jesus glowing and standing next to Jesus and Elijah."

\*\*\*But the plot twists again. In that familiar story of the two disciples walking out of Jerusalem, we know that the stranger who joined them was the risen Christ. We know that as they walked together, he interpreted scripture for them. And we know that he was finally made known to them in the breaking of the bread. We know that their foolishness was redeemed. Their hope lived. The cross was not the end of their hope, but only the beginning.

I like to think that it was then that they remembered the exact words he had told them that day on the mountain when he had glowed before them. I like to think that they remembered that he didn't just say, "Don't tell anybody," but that he said, "Tell no one until after the son of man

has been raised from the dead.” I like to think that when they had broken bread with Jesus and known him through the burning that was in their hearts, they then remembered those words.

But what is dead certain is this. That day on the mountain they did not understand, maybe they didn't even hear those words. They didn't hear: after the son of man has been raised from the dead. Jesus had tried to tell them the whole story. A few verses later he told them “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But these words they did not take in. It was one thing to think about being raised from the dead, maybe after a nice long and successful life. It was quite another to be betrayed and executed. That day on the mountain they preferred the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, a decisive victory and God's enemies crushed.

And that's why Jesus didn't want his disciples telling the story of the transfiguration before he was raised from the dead. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus they would have told a story about how Jesus, like Elijah, would call down the fire of God, defeat the forces of evil and slay them as they deserved. That's what they thought they saw on the mountain that day.

But after Jesus' death and resurrection, they could not tell the story that way. Jesus had met the forces of evil, and they had easily overcome him. Indeed, he had not even fought back. In the resurrection Jesus did defeat the forces of evil, but Jesus' defeat of the forces of evil was unlike Elijah's. Jesus' defeat of the forces of evil came through his own defeat, what Fred Buechner calls the magnificent defeat.

Some call it the glory of the cross. They mean by that the glory of God is not shown in powerful firestorms. It shown through love and forgiveness, love and forgiveness even in the face of the greatest evil. God is love and forgiveness. The glory of God is love and forgiveness, even unto death, even unto death on a cross. The only way the disciples could begin to understand this was to see that Jesus was not defeated in his defeat, that God, that love and forgiveness, and only love and forgiveness, can overcome the forces of evil.

This is very hard for us, as it was for Jesus' disciples. It's one reason why so many people like to think of Jesus as someone you believe in rather than someone you follow. It's a lot more palatable to say that belief in Jesus' resurrection saves us than it is to say that Jesus' resurrection proves the truth of a way of life, a way of life that calls us to discipleship, a way of life that entails attempting to live as he did.

Paul Neuchterlein says, “Jesus came to trans-figure our experience of God.” And that is very challenging.

Many times we stand at a particular crossroad where we are required to choose between calling on the fire of God and love and forgiveness of God.

Families

War

Politics

Are we to call down the fire of God or the love and forgiveness of God? Our answer comes from the mountain: this is my son; listen to him. Amen.