

B Transfiguration 2.11.24

Mark 9:2-9

Focus Statement: Jesus gives us glimpses of glory.

As a kid, I did not like rollercoasters. I like them now, but that's not the point of this illustration. The point is, as a kid, not a fan. It wasn't the speed or the curves, I liked that well enough. What I didn't like was the drops. I didn't like that feeling of my stomach being still at the top of the hill while the rest of me was far below. If we dropped down and then went up again, or around a curve, that part was fun. But the dropping, not a fan.

I didn't like rollercoasters, but I rode them for two reasons. One, of course, was peer pressure. I didn't want to be the party pooper of the group who didn't want to ride any of the rollercoasters. But the second reason was this, as much as I hated the dropping down, I loved the view from the top. I loved that moment when the coaster had crept to the peak of the tracks, and the whole park, whole city, whole California Valley depending on the park, was spread out before me. This of course was followed immediately by the existential dread of dropping down multiple stories to what sure felt like my doom. But that moment of clarity, and not wanting to look like a scaredy cat in front of my friends, was enough to keep me riding.

I was thinking about rollercoasters this week, and specifically that moment of clarity at the top, because in a way I think that's what's happening in our Gospel text for Transfiguration Sunday. Biblical scholar Ched Meyers describes Mark's Gospel as having three pillars, three peaks, if you will, where who Jesus is is fully revealed to the reader. The first is right at the earliest moment of his ministry, the earlier moment of the Gospel really. At Jesus' baptism,

when as he is coming up out of the waters of the Jordan, the heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends like a dove upon him, and a voice proclaims from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." The third is at the very end of everything, the moment of his death on the cross, when Jesus cries his last, the skies become dark, the curtain in the Temple is torn in two, and the Centurion standing at the foot of the cross proclaims, "Truly this man was God's Son." Two great revelations, two mighty displays of who Jesus is and how God's glory is revealed in him.

And then there's the Transfiguration. You might have noticed some similarities between the baptism and crucifixion revelations and this one. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white, the clouds descend upon them, and a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." We've got all the markings of an apex moment in revealing who Jesus is, but why now? Why in the middle of Mark's Gospel, in chapter nine, still far away from Jerusalem, his crucifixion, and all that is to come. This is Mark's Gospel after all, everything happens immediately. Think of everything that happened just in chapter one, and we still have six chapters to go. Certainly we're nowhere near the end.

Except, we are near the end. Just the disciples haven't realized it yet. Mark's Gospel is a book with two halves. The first half is more of what we've been reading, a frenetic race through Jesus' ministry. But in the second half, which starts right here, the pace of the narrative slows way down as we begin a slow, steady, deliberate march to the cross. A march that Jesus knows he is going on. While his disciples, despite Jesus telling them no less than three times exactly what is to transpire, have no idea is happening. In fact, the

first time Jesus told them was immediately before this reading, in chapter eight. You likely remember the story, it's where Jesus asked them, "who do you say that I am?" To which Peter responded, "You are the Christ," and it's like ding, ding, ding, ding, alarm bells going off, because someone who was not a demon finally recognized Jesus for who he truly was. And then, of course, immediately after that Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." And even though, the text tells us, "he said this plainly," Peter still "took him aside and began to rebuke him." Showing, not for the first or last time, that even Jesus' closest followers didn't understand the true nature of his mission. And so this morning's text tells us that just "six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John"—Jesus' three closest disciples, the first ones he called to follow, the ones he brought on his closest healings, the ones he'll take to the Garden of Gethsemane—up a mountain to witness the Transfiguration.

And I think, Gospel according to Kjersten here but, I think Jesus took these three, and took them right here, to witness this revelation, because Jesus knew things were about to get dark. Jesus knew they were about to take the drop on the rollercoaster, if you'll allow me to return to my previous image, and things weren't going to be as clear as they'd seemed in the Galilee. For the first eight chapters of his ministry, they'd witnessed nothing but success. They saw Jesus preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and feeding thousands, all while crowds of followers pressed in on them. So many people that by chapter one, Jesus was already unable to enter a town for the crowds, but would instead stay in the desolate places where people could gather. And what Jesus knew that Peter,

James, and John did not was that all of that was about to change. Yes there was still Palm Sunday ahead of them, but after that, people would drop away like flies. And not only would followers abandon him, but what crowds remained would change their shouts of praise to jeers, condemnation, and calls for his crucifixion. Even these three would fall away, first falling asleep in the Garden, then leaving him to die alone on the cross, so that by the time he was laid in the tomb, only the three women remained who would seek out his body to give him a proper burial. And of course, we know what happened at that point, but that's, again, not now. Now the disciples have seen nothing but success, and Jesus knew that was not the course of the rest of his mission. And so, in the transfiguration, I think Jesus was giving them this gift of a glimpse of his glory. A gift that not only might sustain them through the trials that were to come, but that would be something they could lean on for the rest of their lives. So that long after not just his crucifixion, but his resurrection and ascension into heaven, they could look back on this moment and say, remember how even after that, things got so hard. But look at all that came later, and all that we couldn't know yet, that Jesus was showing up only in part in that amazing day on the mountain top.

Jesus gave the disciples a glimpse of his glory. And I think Jesus gives us glimpses of glory as well. They are not always, I would say even not often, as absolutely can't be missed as this image, but they are every bit as powerful. In her beautiful essay, *High Tide in Tucson*, Barbara Kingsolver describes those everyday moments like this: "In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark

sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again.”

That’s what these glimpses do for us, they teach us, again and again, that God is with us, that we are beloved, and that, when we listen, we can always hear Jesus’ voice. They are rarely big, flashy moments like transfiguration, but they are there. I can tell you just a few glimpses I saw this week. I saw glimpses of Christ’s presence in the kindness of the medical examiner as I stood with Wayne and Vicki on the night of Rose’s death, her deep listening, her care, her weird enthusiasm in discovering that Wayne and Rose were Lutheran. I saw them in the support and laughter Co-op members share everyday, figuring out new ways of being in the world. I saw it in the most amazing sunset as I was riding the bus to a basketball game in Mendon. And so I invite you, this week, this month, this Lenten season, to be on the lookout for glimpses of God’s glory. We did this all summer, we called it God sightings, so you’ve already got some muscle memory for this work. Look for those moments of sustaining, showing us how, in the darkest times and the moments of great joy, in hope and heartbreak, no matter what mountain peak we look down from or valley we trudge through, there too is Jesus, giving us reminders that there is always more beauty to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.