

Mark 9:2-9  
Last Sunday after Epiphany, 2015  
The Rev. John Forman

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If you have been anywhere near network television in the past two weeks, you have probably noticed the return of February sweeps. That's when television executives launch promotional campaigns to get us to tune in. Broadcasters use the viewership numbers collected during sweeps to set advertising rates for the rest of the year. With a year's worth of advertising dollars riding on a few weeks of viewing habits, they use spectacular stunts and shameless gimmicks to get us to watch.

For years, the networks have relied on a common formula. Promotions for everything from contests and reality shows to dramas and soap operas announce dramatically: "This is the episode where everything changes." Or they ask in dark, ominous tones, "Are you ready for everything to change?" Others promise that the characters in whatever rehashed show they are selling will be facing "a whole new reality." The promo for a new drama this season declares that "one act will change everything." You have probably also noticed by now that, despite these claims, network television rarely delivers anything really different.

I find it ironic that this Gospel reading in the midst of the February sweeps does exactly the opposite. Without any fanfare or announcement beforehand, Jesus brings three people into the heart of the mystery where God reveals the Divine Presence, the *shekinah*, radiating from Jesus in glory with such brilliance that the three disciples are terrified. And when this reality-shifting moment is over, Jesus orders them to tell no one.

This story takes place in the center, the heart, of Mark's Gospel; a pivot point. Everything since Mark's first line: "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," has led to this event, where the voice of God affirms that Jesus is the Son of God. From this peak experience, this vision of the glory of God

revealed, the disciples head back down the mountain and we head into Lent, toward Holy Week and the crucifixion, where one more human, a Roman centurion, will watch Jesus breath his last and say, “Truly, this man was God’s Son.”

But today, the last Sunday in Epiphany, just for a moment, we join Peter, James and John on a mountain-top experience. I had a friend years ago, an experienced climber who summited both K2 and Mount Everest without oxygen. I remember him telling me that the hardest part of any climb was two-fold. First, it requires a great deal of discipline not to give in to the temptation to stay at the summit for “just a little longer.” Second, the trip back down the mountain is where the climber is most severely tested. Inexperienced climbers who spend more than a few seconds at the top of some of the larger peaks risk dangerous disorientation. My friend can only recall dreamy, surreal moments of his reaching the tops of K2 and Everest. Similarly, inexperienced climbers can expend all of their energy trying to get to the summit, as if that were the entire goal, and then have no reserves for the dangerous trip back down, which is where numerous climbers have died. Without the more obvious goal of reaching the top, a climber must find another motivation in the return.

So, too, we must remember that peak experiences of God are not the entire goal, but the half-way point. Peter, an inexperienced climber, misunderstands that witnessing the transfiguration was a momentary appreciation of the glory of the consummated kingdom. The revelation of Jesus’ unique glory has not finished the work of getting back down and through the wilderness.

If there is any scene, perhaps short only of the crucifixion, if there is any scene that defies easy interpretation and fogs the mind of those who see it, it’s the transfiguration. Even Mark seems to struggle to find words to explain that which can only be apprehended, but not comprehended. Experienced, not fully understood. Jesus’ clothes, Mark writes, became, in the Greek, “shining exceeding-

white of such a kind a bleacher on earth is not able to thus whiten.” A more dazzling brightness, in other words, than anything earthly possible.

And then Jesus is joined by Elijah and Moses. Peter clearly recognizes them...but how? There were no images of these two and Peter had no personal encounter with them. Yet, here they are, so present that Peter can suggest building tents specifically for Elijah and Moses. Mark continues to point to that which can only be apprehended, but not comprehended.

That Elijah and Moses were present and speaking to Jesus on the mountain top that day, is a breakthrough non-rational experience of God’s timelessness and humanity’s participation in that timelessness through God. Mark’s Gospel clearly assumes a profound spiritual continuity with Torah and the prophets of Israel. Jesus is neither a counter to Judaism nor a successor, but a unique exemplification of the mystery of YHWH.

High on the mountain, in a moment of mystical splendor, Jesus is radiant with the dazzling light of God—but only briefly and to a select few. God unveiled the heavenly mystery, only to veil it again on the cross and then reveal it for all eternity one final time. In the original ending of Mark, the mystery will not be revealed in the glorious light of a resurrection appearance, but in the empty tomb with a solitary human figure, dressed in a white robe, who uses the phrase of the angels, “Do not be afraid” before telling them not only what they were looking for but where to find the Risen Christ.

But Peter—so very human, so earnest and so much like us—Peter has taken this world-shattering encounter with Jesus, Elijah and Moses as the pinnacle of the event; the summit of the experience. By suggesting tents, he seeks to contain the otherwise overwhelming experience into a pre-existing perspective. God’s voice from the cloud does not respond to what Peter suggests, but instead nearly

interrupts Peter's saying anything at all with a command listen to Jesus; to experience and to trust the wonder and mystery of Jesus.

Here on this Last Sunday of Epiphany, just days before Lent, we too are invited to relax our need to explain, to capture, the glorious mystery that cannot be fully explained nor captured, but that is here, *now*, to be experienced.

Today, it is enough to be still and silent, to close our mouths and open our hearts to the marvel. Today, it is enough to set our search for certainty aside in the dazzling face of the mystery. Today, it is enough to restrain our human skills for analysis to simply receive what God is giving. Today, it is enough to simply be present, overwhelmed by holy wonder.

Over the next days and weeks, the glory of Christ God will be present and radiating for all of us, perhaps not in revelations like Peter, James and John experienced, but in our ordinary hopes, our day-to-day encounters, and in the joys and tragedies of our everyday life. Every experience of falling in love, of being lifted up from a fall, of new friendship is a small moment of what Peter, James and John saw on the mountaintop. Jesus never intended to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority and prestige. Jesus pointed through and beyond himself to God and God's coming reign on earth so that we might, in time, find our voice in bearing witness to this transformative, redemptive God. The Son of God is risen; it is time for us to find our voices and speak about the love that we have encountered on our own mountaintops.

After all, the transfiguration story in Mark's Gospel, is not about sheer arbitrary power. The transfiguration is a moment of awesome, but tender holiness. And holiness, as a characteristic of God, is participatory and shared. Because God loves, God interacts in relationship. Because God loves, God's holiness expresses itself in self-giving. And when God's love reveals itself in ways that unsettle the orderly lives we've constructed and the comfortable perspectives

we've adopted, we may find ourselves trying to contain God's revelation in some preset expectation; to build a tent for the mystery.

But maybe there is only a need to experience the wonder and mystery of God and God's love together. Not alone, but with others. Not building tents to make the encounter neat and tidy, but building relationships to accompany each other on the way back down the mountain. Not in safety necessarily, but walking together in the mystery of God and for others.

The glory of the Divine Presence, the *shekinah*, radiating from Jesus at the transfiguration affirms life and love. The light that today radiates from the Risen Christ shines ahead into Lent to keep that season in perspective; never without hope, never without trust. That same light speaks a perpetual promise that God is present, that God can be met, that God seeks relationship because God is love. What is perhaps most amazing is this: having stood, amazed, bathing in the glory of that light, that same love-light can radiate from us for those we meet once we are down from the mountaintop. That is the episode where everything changes.