

**The Last Sunday after the Epiphany**  
***The Transfiguration of Jesus***  
**February 11, 2018**  
**Mark 9:2-9**  
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“Come on boys. Let’s take a hike up the mountain”. The time was right. He needed a retreat. The mission was going well. He had touched so many people who needed healing. They would come and gather around him, sit with rapt attention, listening to him teach. Some he knew were hungry, searching and open. He could see it in their eyes. Others were plainly curious. Had heard how he spoke with authority. His reputation was spreading. He offered something that seemed – they couldn’t exactly say why, but what he offered seemed – fuller somehow, more. He preached about the existence of another kingdom – not one ruled by Rome, or any other powerful nation they knew of. A kingdom ruled by the holy God.

Adventure was calling. Something “larger than life” was calling. Something that had the power to expand their hearts, minds, and spirits beckoned. A loyal group of twelve had gathered around him, traveled with him everywhere he went. This time, just the inner circle of three - Peter, James, and John – made the hike with Jesus up the mountain.

Jesus had reached a threshold. A transition, a turning point. His Abba was leading him to cross over into a new place. A place where he, and those who followed him would move into more critical and challenging and worthy fullness.

A threshold is a point of departure or transition. Like that once quaint custom when the groom of the newly married couple picks up his bride and carries her over the threshold into their home, threshold moments are always about facing toward change. Thresholds are often at the same time exhilarating and frightening.

Thresholds. Some are simple, like turning the next page and beginning a new calendar year on January 1st. Other thresholds are much weightier, require more time, intentional preparation, energy, and investment of ourselves. Birth. Adoption. Baptism. Marriage. Starting school. Graduation. Moving into our first home or apartment. Job promotion. Retirement. Downsizing to a smaller home.

There are three threshold moments for Jesus in Mark, three turning points where Jesus moves more deeply into the fullness of the mission to which God has called him. The first was at his baptism, when Jesus alone hears the words rumbling from the heavens: *“You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.”* This confirmed his identity. Beloved Son.

The second threshold moment is today’s story of Jesus’ going up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. While there, Jesus is transfigured, his clothes turned dazzling white. He is joined by those two great Hebrew forefathers of faith Moses and Elijah.

This time there is a small, terrified and dumbfounded audience of those three disciples with him. Again, the words rumble from the heavens declaring: *"This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!"* The third threshold moment comes later in Mark. It is a much more public scene, one of final desolation when Jesus is crucified and dies, and the Roman centurion standing by says: *"Truly this man was God's Son."*

For that moment on the mountain, could it get any better for the disciples than the glory of God shining on Jesus, their Lord, while he is flanked by Moses and Elijah? Could it be any clearer than the voice from heaven declaring who this is, this rabbi, healer, and preacher they have been following? *"This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."*

I believe this was a precious moment of affirmation for Jesus. *"This is MY Son, the Beloved"*. What might Jesus have heard in his Abba's voice this time? Jesus must have cherished the moments of consolation, connection, and camaraderie as he talks with Moses and Elijah. His spirit must have soaked up their encouragement – literally filling him with courage and strength for what is yet to come. They understood. They had also struggled with their calls from God and faced life-threatening opposition when they tried to be faithful in doing what God called them to do.

When Moses and Elijah had departed, when all was silent again, Jesus said, "Come on boys. It's time. Time to go home, to go back down." He turns to descend down the mountain. And in that moment, an even more profound divine power is revealed. Jesus has set his face to go toward Jerusalem. He will walk down and into intensifying conflict with the Roman government and some of the Jewish religious establishment who are in collusion with Rome. Rome will squash any threat that might undermine the power of their empire.

Peter, James, and John didn't know what to make of this mountaintop experience. Terrified, mystified, Peter suggested they set up base camp there for awhile. Things have been going so well. The crowds are getting larger. The disciples want and expect the glory of Jesus' successful mission to continue – his challenging teaching, the power of his healing touch and words, preaching that keeps circling back to servanthood – "whoever wants to be first among you must be the very last, servant of all". But before the trip up the mountain, Jesus and Peter have already had a go round when Jesus started telling them what was to come - his suffering, rejection, being killed and raised after three days. Peter took the Lord aside and rebuked him, and Jesus responds abruptly, "Get behind me Satan. You are not thinking about God's plan, but your own."

Jesus would have been far safer staying up on the mountain. They could have relocated, built a place to live up there. But the whole point of Jesus' becoming human was to come down to where we live. Into the nitty-gritty details of confused, squabbling, disbelieving disciples; down into political and religious quarrels and divisions of the day; down into the judgments, jealousies and rivalries that color, complicate, and corrode human relationships.

This act of Jesus' coming down is what the apostle Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

Jesus came down the mountain, down to meet us, to be with us. Came down so he could come close, touch and heal us in our most hidden and well-defended places. Those times we have failed. Those parts of us we fear will repulse Jesus and make him turn away from us. Secrets we keep of which we are ashamed. Parts of us we believe make us "not good enough" to come to Jesus or be in God's presence. Jesus is not afraid of what is difficult in our lives, and will not reject us. We don't have to hide the hard parts of our lives from God. There is no successful program for us to lift ourselves up, to somehow climb up to reach God. It is all about Jesus coming down to us.

Jesus came down to enter death, descend to hell and be raised to new life – all to show us the power of God's love, and the breadth, depth, and height of God's love for us. Down he came into our brokenness, fear, and loss. Down to our valleys of disappointment, despair, and disconnection. Down to face the cross and all that is humanly difficult, deadly, and despicable. Down to reach us, to forgive, reconcile, heal, lift us up and restore us to our original glory, shining with the same glorious light that surrounded Jesus there on the mount of transfiguration, and after his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus came down to walk with us through the world's brokenness and pain, emptying himself to be raised up to give us hope and new life. To assure us that wherever we go Christ has already been there, and where Christ now is we will one day be – fully at home with God, in union with all that is holy and true. Living in the glory of God's eternal light and love.

Jesus couldn't live out the life he was called to live staying up on the mountain. Neither could the disciples. And neither can we.

We are now on the threshold of Lent. What we are invited to do in Lent is "listen to Jesus". Listen to his words and silence. What might we hear if we listen to him as we follow along in Mark's gospel? "Follow me". "Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid." "You give them something to eat." "Do not be afraid, only believe." "It is what comes out of a person that defiles." "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." "What do you want me to do for you?" "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone." "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

Today, and each day, we can offer all of who we are to Jesus. He understands how hard it is to be faithful. To be committed to listening for God's will and ways. To choose to intentionally exercise trust in order to face and walk amidst the neediness and brokenness – in ourselves and in the world around us – and offer it all back to God.

Like the sunflower turns toward the sun, lifting its head to take in the light , we can turn God-ward, too. This is what we do when we offer our prayer of confession, when we pray for ourselves and others, when we come to the table and reach out hands to receive the goodness and love, the hope and strength Jesus offers us in himself. One question we might ponder as Lent begins on Ash Wednesday is: How and why do I resist turning toward the light and love of Christ? Of what am I ashamed or afraid? What in me seems beyond the reach of Christ's healing love- too needy, too empty, too ugly, too broken?

We are invited to lay those burdens down. We are meant to receive the healing touch, the light and love, the new life Christ continually offers. So let's go together, friends. It's time to hike down the mountain and into the world. We've got love and light to give away in Jesus' name.

Amen.