

“...Only Jesus”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 22, 2009

Transfiguration Sunday

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 9:2-8

Six days ago – I can hardly believe it was only that long – it was 55 degrees, a beautiful sunny day as I was hiking up Stone Mountain, outside of Atlanta, where I was staying with my brother and his family. Although many of the locals were wearing their warmest coats, complete with hats and mittens, we had decided that long sleeves should suffice. In an attempt to encourage my nephews – ages 5 and 7 – and to test their scientific knowledge, I assured them that it would be warmer at the top since we would be closer to the sun. About halfway up the mile and a half-long trail, I was proven wrong: the wind began to pick up and the temperature seemed to drop. By the time we reached the summit – with no trees or other hills to block the wind, we came to realize that even in Georgia, coats in February are a good idea.

But no trees and no other hills, on a beautiful sunny day, also allowed for an incredible view; not only of the sprawling Atlanta skyline – about 30 miles away – but on to a horizon that lay well beyond. There’s something unique and awe-inspiring about looking down from the top – whether from a mountain or a skyscraper or an airplane. Because of the perspective, you can see more than you ever expected to. From the height of the mountaintop, the world seems to expand as you are able to take in so much at once.

It starts off ordinary enough. Jesus and his three closest friends - Peter, James, and John – travel up a high mountain. Nothing unusual. Jesus often went off from the crowds to pray and rest. But from here on, ordinary ends. No sooner do they arrive than Jesus is transfigured before their eyes – *metamorphosis* is the Greek word – which literally means his person was changed. Mark describes Jesus as looking as white as snow – as if his skin and clothes had been bleached. Something substantial – whether in form or appearance – had become different: not only out-of-the-ordinary, but absolutely out-of-this-world which, of course, is precisely what the story wants to convey.

And if that is not out-of-the-ordinary enough, two of the Hebrew faith's most honored heroes suddenly appear by Jesus' side. Moses, the great law-giver, and Elijah, the mighty prophet – representing the Law and the Prophets – are now seen paying respect to Jesus.¹

This is both literally and figuratively a "mountain-top experience." Not only does it take place high atop a mountain, far removed from the ordinary routines down in the valley, but it

¹ David Leininger, “Wow!”

also takes place six days after Jesus had first told the disciples about his impending passion. In order to fulfill his God-given purpose, he told them, he must die and rise again. Furthermore, the way of the cross is required for all who truly follow him.

In Mark's gospel, this scene functions as the peak of the drama, the closest these three disciples come to experiencing the fullness of God in Christ. For they see him as God's Son and hear God's voice calling to them, before being led back down to travel with Jesus on his long journey toward the cross.

The disciples who accompanied Jesus to the top of Mt. Hermon did not have perfect faith. Mark – throughout his gospel – portrays the disciples' difficulty in recognizing Jesus and the significance of his ministry. Yet, despite their shortcomings, they were the ones that God chose to carry the gospel message after Jesus was gone: James, who became the greatest apostle in Jerusalem; John the gospel author who was known throughout the Christian world as the "beloved disciple;" and Peter, the "rock" who led the church through its formative years.

But, on the mountaintop, the disciples could not yet grasp what was happening in their midst. Why was Jesus shining a brilliant white? Why were Moses and Elijah there? What was to be their role in this dramatic event? Not knowing what else to say, Peter suggests that they build three booths – a type of tent that was normally used in religious festivals. "Let's make this permanent," Peter seemed to be suggesting, "Let's not allow the moment slip away."

How many times have you said, "Oh, I wish that I had my camera; if only I could make this moment last forever." Maybe, you remember the day of your children's birth this way, or watching them walk for the first time, or graduate from high school. Maybe you had a revelation about your life's purpose; maybe you were brought back from the brink of an addiction or some other devastation. Or, it might have been a vision or a message, from God or some messenger of the divine. Maybe an overwhelming sense of peace, or forgiveness, or understanding. It is these moments we want to capture, but we soon realize are fleeting. Try as we might, our mountaintop experiences do not last; and pretty soon, it's time to come back down to the valley and try to apply what we've seen into the rest of our lives.

Often, in retrospect at least, we wonder why those experiences happen when and where they do in the course of our lives. In Mark's gospel, this trip up the mountain takes place right as Jesus is set to begin his final journey to Jerusalem: telling his disciples that after his arrival there, he will die and rise again. They, of course, cannot believe; or do not want to believe that this could happen to Jesus – and that he would willingly walk into the hands of peril. Surely – the disciples must have thought – there must be another way, a better way, for Jesus to fulfill his mission to heal the sick and bring release to the captives and feed the hungry and tell the good news to the world.

By taking them to the top of the mountain, Jesus offers his disciples a glimpse into the future: to the coming days when his divinity and divine purpose would be fully revealed to them.

The journey ahead would not be easy; and so while here they might be given a foretaste of glory, the disciples – like Jesus himself – would still have to “drink the cup” of trial and suffering in order to fully experience God’s glory.

Although our glimpses of the divine may be brief – and the number of mountaintop experiences might be few and seemingly far between, the words that the disciples heard that day still ring true this day. “Listen to him.” Among the many competing and conflicting voices in our world – some good, some not; some wise like Moses, others prophetic like Elijah; some forecasting dark days, others proclaiming the sure pathway to great success – among all those voices, God says to these precious few disciples, “listen to him.” For at the end of the story, at the end of the day, there is only Jesus. Peter – always the first to speak up – whether professing Jesus as Lord or suggesting to build some tents or denying Jesus on the eve of the crucifixion – Peter got it right when he says to Jesus: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

How can we orchestrate these energizing, even life-changing, mountaintop experiences during the course of our journey? The answer is that we cannot! Sorry. Instead, we wait. If you remember, Peter, James, and John were there with Jesus because they had been invited - there were nine others who were not. I suspect the reason is that some were ready, others were not.

Do you want to be ready for an invitation to the mountain top? Here are a few humble suggestions.

First, make yourself available. Peter, James, and John were invited up the slope because they were already in the company of Jesus. The company of Jesus nowadays is right here – in the church. Those who, for whatever reason, choose to absent themselves from the fellowship will not be ready to respond to the invitation.

Second, learn all you can about the Word of God and your faith tradition. Go to Sunday School, join a Bible Study, commit to personal devotions. Mark’s Gospel does not tell us how Peter, James, and John recognized Moses and Elijah, but they did, and they knew how incredibly important these men were. Had they never heard of them, the moment on the mountain would not have been nearly so special.

Third, listen to Jesus. Only twice in the gospels does God speak - once at Jesus' baptism, and again here. God minces no words. "This is my son, the Beloved; Listen to Him." Listen to Him. We can hear him as we worship, as we study scripture, in the voice of other Christians. “Listen to Him.” It is easy to listen to other voices to the point of drowning Jesus out. But, God says,. “Listen to Jesus.”

Finally, remember where God has called you to be: in the valley. The church exists primarily for the sake of those who are not yet old enough to understand it and who presently stand outside it. If we listen to Jesus, we hear him saying, "Go, and make disciples."

At the end of the day, at the end of the story, there is only Jesus. I proclaim this to you with some trepidation, because I believe these two words have too often been taken out of their proper context – used to provoke fear and not faith – intending to belittle those who, like the first disciples had questions and doubts. “Only Jesus” is the favorite refrain of the old-style Southern preacher, implying that nothing else matters.

Well, that’s not true. That’s not the gospel. Others things do matter. Other voices are meant to be heard; other opinions and belief-systems have merit. We were not created to stay on the mountaintop and shield ourselves from the complexities of the world, but to utilize our faith – what we have seen and heard of God – as a guide. For today, our decisions matter; what we do and say matters; how we treat others matters, because along the way and at the end – standing alongside us – is Jesus. Not because this man Jesus was like Moses or Elijah, not because he could do miracles or speak in wise parables, but because this man is the Son of God – the divine made known to us – the one who conquered death and leads us up the mountain, so that we can see and hear how to follow him in the valley. AMEN.