

## Transfiguration Sunday – February 11, 2018

Mark 9:2-9

People talk about mountaintop experiences. Have you ever had one? I've had a few. Let me tell you about one of them in particular. It was in the second semester of my sophomore year in college, so I was 19 going on 20. I had gone to Purdue University to be a Computer Science major back in the days before the internet and personal computers. I was a pretty good student. Bs in Math, As and Bs in my programming classes, but I wasn't loving the all-nighters I had to pull at least once a week to debug my programs, and I wasn't sure I wanted to spend my life doing that. At the same time I was getting solid As in my Russian language classes that I had taken from my very first semester, and intrigued by the possibility of studying abroad in the Soviet Union. A third part of my college life was my active participation in the Lutheran Campus Ministry and the local Lutheran congregation it partnered with. The Campus Ministry had weekly meetings on Wednesdays and every Sunday I walked the 25 minutes across campus to attend Our Savior Lutheran Church. On top of all of that I dropped in on my campus pastor fairly often to talk about, "life, the universe, and everything" and sorting out my upbringing in the Missouri Synod during a time of church conflict. It was during or after one of those conversations that finally, all at once, everything became clear to me. I knew what I was going to do. Everything made sense. I was excited, I was relieved, and I was filled with purpose. I would change my major to Russian, I would study abroad in the Soviet Union, and I would go to seminary after I finished college. Moments of clarity like this, moments of spiritual connection and intense emotion can't be scripted. They just happen. Or, more often, they don't. For me, they have happened in times of stress or transition.

Today's Gospel reading is literally a mountaintop experience for the disciples. It's a weird story. Jesus on the mountain, transfigured in a cloud, shining, clothes perfectly white. (This was NOT a Tide ad!) And with Jesus are Moses and Elijah, although I wonder every time I read this story how the disciples knew that it was Moses and Elijah. Maybe they introduced themselves? Wore name tags? I don't know. But somehow they knew. Moses, the leader of God's mission to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Elijah, a Winston Churchill, "Darkest Hour" kind of figure who remained faithful against all odds. These are the heroes of Israel's covenant with God, and here they are talking to Jesus. This is some real religious "cred" that Jesus has going on here. But the disciples don't really know what to do with it.

To really get what's happening here we need to back up to the previous chapter. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time by now, and they know that he is an extraordinary religious leader. They've had some pretty remarkable experiences. Finally Jesus asks them, "what are people saying about me?" "Some say you're John the Baptist" (maybe John wasn't really killed after all.) "Some say you're Elijah or another prophet." So then Jesus asks them, "OK, but who do *you* think I am?" and Peter pipes up, "You're the Messiah!" to which Jesus responds, "Don't tell anybody." Then he begins to tell them that he is preparing to go to Jerusalem where he will be handed over to the religious authorities and be put to death, after which he will rise again. And once again, Peter speaks up and they have an argument. Peter says, "No way you're going to do that." Jesus says, "Yes way I'm going to do that. Get behind me, Satan!" And then he tells the rest of the disciples that if they want to follow him they have to be prepared to take up their own crosses. So the mood coming into today's reading had to have been tense. Here they were thinking Jesus was a conquering hero, and here he is talking about dying.

So we're back to that scene with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Now Peter wants to put up a tent for each of them. Maybe Jesus misspoke. Here he is in the company of Moses who defeated the Egyptians and Elijah who defeated the prophets of the foreign god Baal. Maybe Jesus will be the

conqueror of the Romans after all. He sees Jesus as the equal of the greatest religious leaders of Israel, and that's why he wants to put up three equal tents. Then God's voice speaks out of the cloud directly to the disciples: "This is my beloved son. Listen to him!" And when they look up then there is only Jesus.

Two profoundly significant things in these two sentences directly from the voice of God: First, Jesus is so much more than even the greatest heroes of the past. This is God's own son, in the flesh, shining with God's own glory, like way back when on Mt. Sinai. Second, that stuff that Jesus has just been saying that they thought was so crazy and wrong? That's what they need to listen to. Jesus knows what he's doing. Here for a brief, shining moment there is clarity. They know who Jesus is, and they know they need to continue following him. But it doesn't last long. And that's what I find particularly interesting about this mountaintop experience of the disciples. Because I think it's true for all mountaintop experiences, ours as well. They don't last long. And they don't sustain us over the long haul.

Once they're down the mountain the disciples go back to their old selves. Jesus announces twice more that he is heading to his death, and each time they are confused. The second time they change the subject. Even though God has spoken to Peter, James, and John in such a dramatic way, it doesn't stop them from later abandoning him as he is arrested and crucified. If even the best imaginable mountaintop experience was not enough for the disciples, should we be surprised if our own mountaintop experiences fail to sustain us?

An important part of Mark's point in writing his gospel is that the disciples cannot know what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah until he is crucified and resurrected. So for the rest of the gospel they are going to continue to be confused. But we know that they became the witnesses of Jesus death and resurrection and the ones upon whom the earliest church was built. What sustained them over the long run was not their mountaintop experiences, but their regular gathering on the day of resurrection to experience Jesus' ongoing presence with them through Word and Sacrament.

The Transfiguration then was kind of like a sugar rush. It got the disciples going, got them to stick with Jesus as he headed to Jerusalem. Their weekly gatherings after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, though, those were their protein and vegetables. Those were what sustained them over the long haul.

We're getting ready to come down the mountaintop of the Christmas and post-Epiphany seasons to the plain of Lent. Lent is a season for focusing on our relationship with God, and especially on what does sustain us in the more mundane and difficult moments of our life.

Just like the disciples, what sustains us over the long haul in our lives is not our mountaintop experiences. It is rather listening to Jesus: heeding his call and trusting his promises. What sustains us is the promises of God with us in the sacraments of the church: remembering our baptism daily, and our weekly celebration of Holy Communion. What sustains us as well is our care for one another in the body of Christ what Luther called the "mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters in Christ" – sharing the promises of God's love and faithfulness with one another in good times and bad.

At the end of the service today we're going to sing the Transfiguration hymn, "How Good Lord to be Here." I want you pay attention to the final stanza, the very last thing we'll sing before Lent: "How good, Lord, to be here. Yet we may not remain. But since you bid us leave the mount, come with us to the plain." May we be sustained by the presence of Christ in our midst in the coming weeks, in our worship, in our fellowship, and in our daily lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.