

Scripture Lesson: Mark 9:2-10

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 41-42

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Mark 9:2-10

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“The Overview Effect

Pastor Amy Terhune

I want to begin this morning by reading a few paragraphs from Rev. Lori Wagner. These aren't my words. These are her words and ideas, and I want to give credit where credit is due. She writes:

“We as human beings since the beginning of our time on earth have loved looking up at the stars and imagining what it must be like to reach those distant heavens. Those who have traveled outside of the earth's orbit have had the opportunity to star gaze in a very different fashion. Unlike the fascinating, familiar feeling we all get when viewing the heavenly constellations that we see from our earthly habitat, astronauts have unanimously experienced a stunning, somewhat eerie phenomenon as they viewed planet earth from the vastness of space. Frank White calls their life-changing experience “the overview effect.”

“The “overview effect” is a kind of cognitive shift, a staggering shift in perspective. Most have characterized the effect as a state of awe and overwhelming emotion so powerful that it caused changes in the observer's self-concept, value system, and religious awareness for the rest of their lives. The experience completely transformed the viewers' and their concepts of humankind and the realm of the infinite.

“The author who coined the term, “the overview effect,” did so after interviewing astronauts throughout the years, such as Astronaut Ron Garan, who said when viewing the earth from space: *“It really does look like this really beautiful oasis out in the middle of nothingness...it's this oasis against the backdrop of infinity –this enormous universe behind it.”*

“Astronaut Edgar Mitchell added: *“There was a startling recognition that the nature of the universe was not as I had been taught...I not only saw the connectedness. I felt it...I was overwhelmed with the sensation of physically and mentally extending out into the cosmos.”*

“Those interviewed noted that the experience of stepping outside of their own world led to a feeling of gratitude and oneness, an emotional surge of compassion for everything and everyone, a transformative awareness of our unique human connection. Those who experienced the “overview effect” underwent significant emotional and spiritual transformation. No longer did they see the world in terms of dissension, of cultural differences, nations of origin, or differences in social identity. Instead, the world took on a larger, more comprehensive meaning as an interconnected, organic system of life, a cherished gift, an uncharacteristic glimpse of beauty and brightness within an infinity of nothingness.

[5 ¶s from “That Mountaintop Moment” by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.]

Friends, it's not just astronauts that experience "the overview effect". Those who engage in practices of prayer, mediation, worship, service, and other exercises of sincere faith have often describe similar shifts in perspective and understanding, and similar experiences of overwhelming peace, connectedness, deep joy, abiding love, and lasting compassion for others. That is the work of God within us. Today is Transfiguration Sunday—the final Sunday in the season of epiphany. Since the Magi journeyed to Jerusalem some six weeks ago now, we have studied scripture lessons that reveal something of who God is. The lessons of this season teach of God's guidance, God's ability to transform and transfigure the old into the new, and God's redeeming work in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. God loves the hate out of us. God turns distrust into faith. God eclipses despair with hope. God overcomes evil with good. God brings life out of death. Transformation, transfiguration, resurrection—for our purposes today they are synonymous, and they are what God does with and through and within humankind.

Our lesson today is one of those cases where the words on the page are insufficient to capture the experience. How do you describe an experience where God touches earth? I don't think there are words. The scripture tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain, and that Jesus was 'transfigured' before them. The Greek word there that is translated into English as 'transfigured' is *metamorphoomai* – to undergo metamorphosis – you know, like a caterpillar or a tadpole. Jesus' true nature is revealed. He is of God. He is seen speaking with Moses and Elijah, who represent the law and the prophets. This is history culminating on mountain top! This is God's plan coming to fruition. And then Peter butts in with his amazingly brilliant plan for a new retreat center, God's voice calls them to listen, and then it's over, just as astonishingly as it began.

Modern audiences sometimes struggle with the transfiguration account. It's an awesome and profound moment in scripture, but it does beg the question: what is the point? It's a never-to-be-forgotten event. But it's also a never-to-be-repeated occurrence. Is it real? Or is metaphorical? Or is it a misplaced resurrection account? Scholars love to debate that stuff. But the more pressing question, at least for me, is this: is it relevant? What are we supposed to take from this?

Which brings me back to "the overview effect". The scripture tells us that the disciples are terrified. Like the shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night when angels start singing; Like the Israelites passing through the red sea behind a pillar of fire; Like the prophet Ezekiel shuddering from head to toe as a valley of dry bones grow sinews and flesh before his very eyes and clatters to life a vast multitude. Like soldiers and women at an empty tomb. When God really starts moving, it'll knock us to our knees every time. That's what happened with Peter and James and John. They're wowed; awestruck, tossing their sandals in every direction as they kneel on holy ground.

King Duncan tells "...a story about a baby who loved to clap her hands. She clapped for everything, whether it be her lunch, her toys, playing with her parents, or sitting watching waves roll in at the beach. Another couple wondered aloud to the baby's parents if perhaps that didn't get old after a while. To which her parents responded, "We only worry that someday she'll stop." [adapted from "Welcome To The Mountain. Now Go Home" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

That's a legitimate worry, I think. Too many of us resist a sense of awe or of being wowed. We grow out of that childlike wonder. Maybe it's because it's a humbling thing, after all, to witness the glory of God. Maybe we just get desensitized to it. Too many of us have grown up believing that being a disciple of Jesus is something we study – an intellectual pursuit, a rational path. And I'll be the last one to knock the importance of learning about Jesus and his life and teaching. "We can appreciate his acumen, his stories, his sacrificial gift. But until we allow Jesus into our hearts in a transformative kind of way, we will not experience the kind of transformative shift in our perspective that will serve as a life-altering moment.

“John Wesley, the founder of Methodism understood this better than anyone. John had been a social advocate, a sincere loyalist to God, a disciplined disciple, and an Oxford professor of theology. But he knew something was missing. Until his encounter at Aldersgate, where his “heart was strangely warmed” and he experience the touch of God on his spirit, his emotions, his deepest self, his faith remained an intellectual endeavor. Only after his “spiritual awakening” did the movement called Methodism take off. [2 ¶s adapted from “That Mountaintop Moment” by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.]

When we open ourselves to being wowed, awed, touched, encountered by the living Christ, there is a transformative energy that moves inside of us; that shifts our perspective; that connects us to one another. Peter and James and John – they didn’t get it immediately. We forget that they don’t yet know the whole story. And yet, they follow. They watch. They learn. Their hearts are tilled for a harvest they don’t yet understand. Despite all their imperfections, never underestimate the courage of Jesus’ faithful followers. In the weeks leading up to this moment in time, Jesus has been teaching hard lessons – that the Messiah must be betrayed and rejected by his own people, must suffer great torment, be crucified and die, and rise again to life 3 days later. This is a radically new teaching - one his disciples have not heard before. And they don't like it. What's more: they don't get it. Jesus predicts a triumphal resurrection over and over again, but somehow, they never seem to hear that part. For six days, they sit with his promise of death, wrestle with that, hear Jesus words in their minds in the middle of the night when they’re supposed to be sleeping. So no wonder Jesus takes a couple of them away for an afternoon. They need to be reminded of who Jesus is. They need an encounter with God. You can hardly blame Peter for wanting to stay there and build booths. Because really, who wouldn’t want to stay in that moment where the exhaustion and the confusion and the heartache of doing ministry don’t figure into the equation.

A few years back, I got off the plane at Detroit Metro Airport and headed through the terminal towards the baggage claim. As I passed one of those tourist shops there in the airport, my eye was drawn to a navy blue shirt that bore white letters which read: “Welcome to Detroit. Now go home.” I’ve seen nearly identical shirts, save for the city name, in airports around the country. [idea here borrowed from “Welcome To The Mountain; Now Go Home” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Depending upon your perspective, the shirt is either rude or funny. Personally, I tend towards the latter. It made me chuckle. But it also makes me think. Peter suggested that they build three dwellings on the mountaintop for Moses, Elijah, and Christ. He wanted to stay there, safely removed from any talk about betrayal or suffering or dying. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. And I can’t help but wonder if Jesus was wearing a tee-shirt that said, “Welcome to the mountaintop. Now go home.” Because some things can’t be captured and enshrined anywhere but within our own hearts. Friends, the overview effect is very real. When God touches us, when God moves with in us, we are changed. Peter doesn’t have to build anything on the mountain. Jesus himself is the dwelling-place of God—he is God-with-us on the mountain...and in the valleys, too.

Jesus doesn’t stay on the mountain, and neither can we. All too soon, we have to follow Jesus’ lead and head back down into the valley of human suffering, where we serve those who hurt, those who hunger, those who wander homeless or remain incarcerated in our prisons. And the hard part of it is that we also serve those who inflict injury, those consumed by greed, those who mock what is sacred, those who want more than anything to tear the mountain down altogether; those who are too lost in cynicism to see any hope, any connectedness, any reason for grace. They’re loud, but ultimately, they have tunnel vision. This is not of God. You, my friends, are of God. You may not be perfect. Like Peter, you may put your foot in your mouth sometimes. Like James, you may be afraid sometimes.

Like John, you may question in your heart sometimes. But like them, God is moving in you. You are bold. You are strong. You are hopeful. You are conduits of love and divine energy to a community that needs this now.

“So I invite you to step outside of your comfort zone and to open yourself in a new way, to pray with a truly receptive heart, and to engage in whatever “means of grace” will connect you with God in an intimate, powerful, transcendent way. Then ask God to move you, to heal what’s broken, to transform what’s not working and to change you as only God can. As we look towards lent, remember that prayer is more powerful than you think. To pray such a prayer takes courage. But it also gives life.”
[adapted from “That Mountaintop Moment” by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.] Thanks be to God. Amen.