



“Transformed to Go and Grow”

Text: Mark 9:2-9

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

February 11, 2024

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I had a parishioner in Florida say that she doesn't read the Hebrew Scriptures. She said that she doesn't need to, because Jesus "did away with all that. It's no longer relevant." As you heard from many sermons last year, I don't agree with that. Jesus said that he wasn't here to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In this passage, Moses joins him. The man through whom God gave the law - the ten Commandments. And Elijah is present, a prophet, and Jesus is the fulfillment of all the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. But what do their presence with Jesus in this story mean to us today? And what does this story of Jesus "being transfigured...his clothes (becoming) dazzling white..." help to transform our lives?

I think we need to break it down into its components. First, Jesus and the three disciples went up the mountain. We talk about having mountain top experiences. That phrase comes from stories like this in the Bible. At the top of the mountain God is encountered. When we say we have a mountain top experience it means that we have had that moment, that experience, that encounter with God that is rare, but when it happens you know you are in the presence of the Lord. These encounters are life-changing. They are different for everyone, but they are powerful, life-changing. Right? I hope you have all had at least one mountain top experience.

We see God differently because we can see God differently. On top of the mountain we get a different view. We see the bigger picture. We can see God's grandeur, God's handiwork and know God's power and awesomeness in a whole new way.

As we are reminded from Martin Luther King Jr's Mountaintop speech, "I have been to the mountaintop and I have seen the Promised Land and we as a people will get to the Promised Land." The mountaintop experience allows us that glimpse of the Promised Land, a view of God in all God's glory, a God who loves us without exception. Our perspective is changed when we have climbed the mountain and our relationship with Jesus should change as well, because it is there that we see the blessing of God come down upon him. He is transfigured.

In this story we see Jesus' physical appearance transfigured. But the Greek word for transfigured really doesn't translate well into English. As one author put it, "It means something like 'changed shape and Beingness and allness into some other form thereof.'" Changes Beingness and Allness. The being we were before, who we were in our completeness before is all transformed - transfigured into a new being a new all. That's what a mountaintop with Jesus does. We encounter God and then, like Jesus, we are transfigured, our beingness has changed, who we are has changed, and that's good. That is what God wants to have happen to us. Encounter God deeply, intimately over and over again and in so doing be transfigured into a ever newer and better being, better child of God, better servant of God.

So why did Jesus have this particular mountaintop experience with Moses and Elijah? It is, as I mentioned earlier, why Jesus said that he hadn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He was here to fulfill the prophesies and to fulfill the law. By fulfilling the law referred to his death. No more would there need to be animal sacrifice to try and cleanse oneself from sin, but through Jesus' self-sacrifice, a choice that he alone ultimately makes, we are made clean of our sins. This is a gift, a huge gift, that we don't contemplate on often enough or deep enough. Jesus self-sacrificed for each of us, sacrificed his young life so that we could have eternal life with God. It seems like God could have found another way to accomplish this without Jesus' death, but when someone dies trying to save another, we call them a hero. We remember them for their altruistic love. We remember and we are changed that someone loved us so much to save us from death and took that death upon himself. Jesus came to fulfill the law.

The next point that this passage makes is that we are to listen to Jesus. That's exactly what God says, "Listen to him." Listen! And what is it that we are to listen to? Well, it is all his words and actions around loving others, forgiving others, uplifting others, embracing those who are different from us, embracing those who are in need of love, and most of all advocating for the poor and the disenfranchised, the poor, the downtrodden.

Another point of the presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is that all three spoke out against the corrupt power structures of their time, speaking out against powers like Egypt and Rome. Egypt who kept people imprisoned and Rome that kept people oppressed. They were the voices for the people who had no voice and that is what we are to continue to be today - the voice of the privileged to fight against the corrupt power systems that hold people down.

And that leads into the next point. Mountaintop experiences are great! They change us. We encounter God in a bright and new way. It is life changing, but we can't stay up on the mountain. We were never meant to stay up on the mountain. Jesus came down and when he came down he had to face the last forty days of his life; as the corrupt power structure struck out against him, but he walked those forty days toward the cross so that others, us, could have eternal life. What are we willing to do when we come off the mountain? What are we willing to risk to fight the corrupt power structures that oppress and hold down people today - in this country, in China where people are abused as they make the cheap clothing and items that we wear and buy - the minority groups in this country and others. To fight against the power structures which would rather see the other dead than to help bring new life to all.

I heard another story about the amazing theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He originally was very academic and taught with an entirely academic approach. Along the way, Bonhoeffer had a transformation and in that transformation he saw the need for a deeply personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a fully invested living out the call to discipleship, the call that we find in Matthew 25.

He worked diligently to fight against Hitler's rise to power. He started groups to fight against that. In the thirties he was offered a chance to go to England and he took it. He worked there to drum up resistance to Hitler, to work to have England help the resistance fight against the evil that was Hitler. He also had a chance to go the United States and was here when a decision was made that Hitler needed be put down. When he saw the continued destruction Hitler was doing, the mass destruction of the Jews, Bonhoeffer went back to Germany. Bonhoeffer went to be a part of the assassination team. He felt couldn't ask others to risk their lives without him being willing to risk his own as well. This great theologian, this great man, was willing to lay down his life for people he did not know. He was willing to lay down his life for the Jews. The assassination attempt failed and he was arrested and sent to a camp. A year and a half later, on April 9, days before his camp was liberated on April 15, Bonhoeffer was hanged.

I tell you this story because in his prayer life, in his trying to live out what Jesus told him to do through Jesus' words and life, what God told us to do on that mountaintop, Bonhoeffer chose to live out his life in intentional service to God, in intentional spiritual development through prayer and study of scripture. That's how he lived when he came down from his mountaintop experience.

Up the mountain to be Transformed. Transfigured. Made new. Made different. Beingness forever altered. And then down the mountain to live a new and different life, informed by the Spirit, called to listen to Jesus and to follow in his footsteps of helping the poor and the sick and following in his footsteps to speak out and defy the corrupt leaders that oppress; to follow by bringing down the structures that beat down on people.

Church vitality. That is one of the focal points of the Matthew 25 Initiative. It doesn't mean that this church needs to have 1,500 members like in the fifties and sixties. It doesn't mean that the coffers have to be overflowing. That's not what vitality in a congregation looks like. It is excitement to do God's work, it is girding one's self for that work through prayer and study of scripture. It is coming together in fellowship and vision and effort to make a difference in this community and beyond. To respond where there is need. That's church vitality. Intentional faith development. Intentional congregational unity. Intentional work to accomplish a vision, a call.

That is what happened at the transfiguration - for Jesus, for the disciples, for us. Go up the mountain and be blessed and then come down again prepared to grow and to go. The next 40 days are going to be rough, but Jesus stood firm and made a difference and so can we. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church Staff:

Pastor
Director of Music
Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator
Office Administrator

Anna von Winckler
Robert Nicholls
Carrie Aiken
Lora Blaylock



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.fpcev.com

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