

TRANSFIGURATION
AND TRADITION

A SERMON FOR TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY
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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida

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Mark 9:2-9

I thought of this passage recently, when I saw photographs of the landscape in the North Carolina Mountains transfigured by snow. Snow fell, and the ugliness of winter-parched grass, of construction site mud, of fallow farm fields, was covered with a blanket of white. It was a miracle!

So was what happened on that Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus went up with three of His closest friends, Peter, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John. And they saw Jesus changed, transfigured. But it was the watchers, the observers, who were indeed changed the most.

A couple of comments: once again, this is a place where the see the Trinity revealed. Jesus is standing on the mountain, the Son of God, Immanuel, God with us. The Holy Spirit comes upon Him, the presence God in light and cloud, and then the voice of God the Father speaks from heaven, telling the witnesses that this is indeed God's beloved Son.

Along the way to this climactic moment, Moses and Elijah appear beside Jesus.

Moses is the Law Giver, the one to whom God spoke on a mountain top, whether it be called Sinai or Horeb. He is the one who brought the Ten Commandments down off the mountain to God's chosen people to establish a Covenant with them. And Moses was transfigured on that mountaintop, so that his face shone so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil. He was transfigured.

Elijah is a prophet of God, called to speak God's word, to foretell the coming of the Messiah. His great triumph over God's adversaries took place on a mountain, Mount Carmel. And he was the one who did not die, but was taken up into the clouds in a whirlwind. He too was transfigured.

The symbols of mountains and whirlwinds and earthquakes and shining light, signs of God's appearing, of God's presence, are here in the story.

So is the typical bumbling comic relief that Peter seems to supply in the gospels. He wants to build three booths, pitch three tents, to keep Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the mountain so that all the world can come and see them, like the fat man, the bearded lady and the world's smallest horse in the carnival sideshow.

And that's when God speaks. And everybody listens, falling down on their faces before God's power and might.

And when they regained their senses, when they got over their fear, when they were able to look around, they saw only Jesus.

Like Peter and James and John, God has called us. And like Peter and James and John, we seek to follow Jesus. And like Peter and James and John, we will follow Jesus to the mountain top.

And like Peter and James and John, given the opportunity, we will stay there on the mountain top forever.

Every time I've taken a group to Montreat, someone has said, "I wish we could just stay here." Some folks have even said, "I'd like to live here." The valley around Montreat and Black Mountain is filled with retired pastors, Christian educators, missionaries. They've been to the mountain top, and decided to stay.

But those folks who go to places like that to retire have given a lifetime of service to the Lord's work. Peter and James and John are getting set to retire before their work has ever begun.

I said once of my son, well, more than once, that Kris knows what he wants to be: retired with a pension. He just hasn't figured out how to get from here to there.

Well, Peter had it figured out. They'd just build those booths, pitch those tents, erect those brush arbors, put a sign out, "Come see Moses, Elijah, and the Christ" and the world would beat a path to their mountain top.

Or maybe not. Maybe Peter thought that he and James and John were special. They were the ones to whom the transfiguration had been revealed. So they were obviously the chosen of the chosen, the select of the elect, and they were going to stay on the mountaintop with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, three on three. They would keep the secret; they would keep the revelation to themselves.

Neither one of those is acceptable. They are to tell what they have seen, but only after Jesus is risen from the dead. And they did. John has a gospel, three epistles, and the Book of Revelation attributed to him. Peter has a couple of letters in the New Testament, and James has an epistle with his name on it. So they did indeed tell the stories of Jesus. And they obviously told this story of Jesus, for it appears in all four gospels, and here in Mark's gospel is one of the high points of the gospel.

Well, of course it is a high point. It's a mountain top experience. We want to hang onto those forever, to never let them go. But sadly, we have to come down off the mountain, come back to the valley, leave the high points in life for the low points that surely come.

When we come down, when we come back to reality, are we changed? Have we been transfigured? Maybe. It depends upon what we experienced on that mountain top. If it was just the thrill of cool mountain air, thin and crisp, or the beauty of snow-capped peaks, it probably won't change us. Only Jesus can change us. Only Jesus can transfigure us. Only Jesus.

Peter, James and John wanted to transform transfiguration into tradition. And that is what we often do with our mountain top experiences. We go back year after year, until we are going not for the transfiguring moment, but because it is a tradition.

May we never lose the excitement, the awe, the fear, that comes from being in the presence of the One who can transfigure us and transform us?

Let us pray.

Come, Lord Jesus, and transfigure us. Don't just change our faces, our appearance, change our hearts, change our ways. Make us holy, and make us free to be the people we were created to be, after the image of Your Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and set free to witness to the power and the presence that can transfigure our world. Amen.