

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday
Sunday, February 11, 2024**

**“Six Days Later”
Mark 9:2-9**

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“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves” (v. 2). In Scripture, mountains can be places of revelation: as the air gets thinner, reality gets thicker, and God may draw near. On a mountain, Moses encountered God in the revelation of the law (Exodus 19:20); on a mountain, Elijah heard God’s “still small voice” (1 King 19:12).

And the mountaintop in our Gospel Lesson does not disappoint! Jesus “was transfigured before them,” we heard, “and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. [...] Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’” (vv. 2-4, 7).

Everything about this is dramatic and overwhelming: the disciples experience the dramatic transformation of Christ and the overwhelming presence of God. Jesus becomes “dazzling”; the original language can also mean ‘radiant’ or ‘glistening’ (Trenchard; Thayer). Jesus is joined by Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet. And a cloud, which in Scripture can symbolize God’s presence, surrounds them—as God affirms Christ as God’s Son. Wow!

I think, to the disciples, this must have seemed like the age to come, like the world to come; to the disciples, this must have appeared like the vision of a mountain that the prophets had long dreamed to see. “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;” the prophet Isaiah had long ago written, “for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” “And [the LORD] will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken” (11:9, 25:7-8). To the disciples on a mountain, witnessing Christ radiant, with Moses and Elijah and the voice of God—this must have seemed like nothing less than the fulfillment of time.

What Peter does in the midst of all this—well, Peter often gets criticized for this, including by the narrator of the Gospel! “Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’” (v. 5), to which the narrator adds the comment, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified” (v. 6). Preachers (including this one) sometimes make light of Peter, and his impulsive desire to build houses; but, you know, I now find myself more sympathetic to Peter here.

Peter’s response tells us that, in witnessing the transfiguration, he believed the world had changed—and *there was no going back*. The old world was transforming into the new age, and

the prophets' dreams were becoming reality. So Peter—always enthusiastic—offers to do something reverent, something devoted—to “make [...] dwellings” for Jesus, for Moses, for Elijah.

I don't know if it was the best response in that situation; I doubt I would've come up with anything better. However, Peter is bearing witness to a world transformed: to him, this is the new age, and he's seeking to be a faithful servant of the Lord even at the end of time. Because Peter—I think understandably—figured that these dramatic, divine revelations signalled that the old world was no longer, and the world to come was now...which, in some ways, would seem to make a whole lot more sense than what actually happened next: “Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead” (vv. 8-9).

What? But it's like nothing happened! Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appear, the voice of God resounds! Then—then everything goes back to normal; don't tell anybody; the end. I mean, doesn't it make you wonder why all this took place? Why reveal this divine transformation only to revert immediately afterward? Why this transfiguration, only for everything to right back to the way things were before?

But I think we may find a clue in the first three words of our Gospel Lesson: “six days later”—which invites us to ask, ‘So, what happened days ago?’ Six days before the transfiguration, Jesus had—for the very first time—begun to foretell his death and resurrection. In the previous chapter, we read: “he began to teach them that [he] must undergo great suffering, [...] and be killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31). I'm not sure they really heard that last part...

We're not told what happened in those subsequent six days; it's never explained what those six days were like. But I think we can imagine... Jesus—their leader, their teacher, their Lord—had told the disciples that he was on his way to suffer and die. He also said something about “ris[ing] again,” but what does that even mean? They heard ‘suffering,’ they heard ‘killed’—that they understood. So we can imagine the sense of dread, of despair, that weighed on them those six days. Fixating on his impending suffering and death, and it must've felt utterly devastating; the anticipation of Good Friday must've been crushing. For the disciples, the message of death and defeat was painfully clear; but that stuff about rising? They couldn't possibly grasp what that meant.

So “[s]ix days later,” Jesus takes three discouraged disciples “up a high mountain,” and reveals to them what Risen Life looks like. The transfiguration is a glimpse of Easter: the transfiguration is a momentary, fleeting glimpse of the splendour of the Risen Lord. The disciples could dread death, but they couldn't yet imagine Easter; yet in the transfiguration, in this foretaste of the wonder of the world to come, Christ makes Easter more real than death.

It doesn't last; it's only a glimpse. Yet as the disciples descend the mountain, they carry within themselves the memory of that glimpse, the memory of that vision of Easter. When they ascended the mountain, they were weighed down by the despair of Good Friday; but as they

descend the mountain, they're uplifted by the promise of Easter hope—and they carry that hope with them all the way into the valley below.

And what awaits them at the foot of the mountain? A chaotic scene, as a desperate father rushes to Jesus, asking him to heal his child who's been terribly sick since childhood (9:15-22). Yet now, at the base of the mountain, as the disciples encounter anxiety and uncertainty, they do so while carrying within them that glimpse of Easter of hope. And as Jesus heals that child (9:27), a glimpse of Easter breaks through at the foot of the mountain, too.

As for us, we don't live on mountaintops; the transfiguration is not ours to experience. But we do get our own little glimpses of Easter: in prayer and the study of Scripture, in worship and the music of praise, in caring for others and being cared for—we too, through the ministry of this congregation, share in our glimpses of Easter, our glimpses of the hope we find in the Risen Christ. And then—and then we go from those glimpses back to the challenges we face in this hurting world; we too go down the mountain.

Sometimes everything can feel just right in worship or fellowship on a Sunday morning—sometimes the choir is singing and we don't want that moment to end... And then on Monday, our glimpse of Easter can start feeling very far away as we get overwhelmed by various challenges. Yet even then, when we are struggling on a Monday, we still know very well that—"six days later"!—we will gather here again, and share once more in our little glimpses of Easter.

But we can only do that together. Our glimpses of the hope of Easter—we can share these glimpses only together in the shared life of this congregation. In worship, in prayer, in study, in fellowship, in service—in these forms of ministry *together* we are able to uplift each other with the hope and promise that we find in our little glimpses of Easter. Amen.