

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Mark 9:2-9

“...he was transfigured before them...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Years ago when I was a Dean and Chaplain at Mount Holyoke College, I left the Office of Religious Life one spring day to head home. I walked to my car, as I always did, along side the large outdoor amphitheater that was next to our building. That day as I walked past the amphitheater I saw a mother standing in the base of the large grassy stairs that made up the amphitheater and her young son, maybe 3 years old, who was slowly climbing the big steps. Each time the little boy pulled himself up another one of the big grassy steps he would turn around, face his mother below and yell loudly, “Can you see me now?”

There was the little boy, in plain view, one step higher than he had been a minute before, in a large outdoor amphitheater calling out each and every time, “Can you see me now?”

I stopped and watched this little performance. It was so endearing. Up another big stair the little boy would climb, and then he would carefully turn around and bellow out once again, “Can you see me now?” I cannot remember what his mother said. But I do remember thinking: he thinks he is hidden when he is in plain view.

The story about the transfiguration of Jesus is about being hidden in plain view. Until this time, the disciples have somehow not understood who Jesus was. And so Jesus takes Peter, John and James up Mount Tabor and reveals who he is in dazzling, awe-inspiring glory. And yet somehow his true identity still remains unclear to them. It is as if Jesus, transfigured before their eyes, is saying, “Can you see me now?”

Remember that long before Jesus took the three up Mount Tabor, he had been showing the all the disciples who he really was...he had preached with authority, he had performed miracles before their eyes, he had healed the sick, he had cast out

demons who called him the Son of God, he had stilled a storm on the raging sea, he had fed the five thousand and he had walked on water.

And yet, the disciples remained unclear about who he truly was. Jesus was the Holy One, in deep communion with God, and yet his closest followers were confused about his identity and perplexed about his fate.

And so, as we heard in the Scriptural passage read today, Jesus took his most beloved disciples up Mount Tabor and was transfigured before them.

His clothes became dazzling white, he was shimmering with radiant light and Elijah and Moses appeared at his side. And yet somehow the significance of the event, the identity of who Jesus really was, and the meaning of the moment eluded the disciples—even then. Somehow Jesus' true identity was still hidden from them, although in plain view. Peter, James and John still did not quite understand.

Instead of absorbing the moment, the meaning, the power of the transfiguration on the mountain, Peter wanted to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah...to contain them, to house them, to keep them there on Mount Tabor indefinitely.

Listen:

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, 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 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. He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

How often we, like Peter, are presented with God's glory and yet we do not see God—God remains hidden from us although in plain view.

How often we miss the shimmering beauty of God's presence around us because somehow it is hidden although in plain view.

The story of the transfiguration in the Gospel of Mark touches my heart because I can see how easy it would be to behave like Peter. I can relate to Peter.

Like him, I could climb a mountain with Jesus, see him transformed into a light-filled being before my eyes and then say, Gee it's a good thing I'm here, I'll just build some little huts for you and your friends to hang out in.

My heart goes out to Peter...he's so literal, so linear, so limited, so human.

Like Peter, I suspect that I miss many signs and wonders from God that are hidden in plain view. Many signs and wonders from God—hidden in plain view.

What gives me hope for the Peters among us—me included—is that although Peter does not see the fullness of Jesus and his glory, he DOES understand in part, he does glimpse God’s glory, he does see within his limitations and THAT, for us mortals, is good enough.

Peter does not quite get it, but he is trying, he is present, he is glimpsing the glory. The Bible tells us he is frightened and so I appreciate that Peter has his eyes open and that he is doing his very best.

The fullness, the power, the magnitude of who Jesus is may still be hidden in plain view BUT Peter is glimpsing the glory of God, he is frightened and so in his overwhelmed state he resorts to DOING something instead of just BEING something. He thinks he’ll DO something (build some dwellings) instead of just BEING amazed—standing there as a witness with jaw-dropping astonishment. How often we resort to DOING instead of just BEING.

How much we are like Peter.

If Peter had not resorted to finding something to do, maybe he could have appreciated the sight, the significance, the full presence of God.

How much we are like Peter.

My friends, the transfiguration is a thrilling moment, it is a story of revelation and drama, a light shining in the darkness, a vision of pure glory. And what is remarkable is that this story with all its dazzling beauty is right at the center of the Gospel of Mark—a Gospel that is heavy and gloomy. The story of the transfiguration is at the heart of the Book of Mark which has been called “an extended reflection on the crucifixion.” In fact, the Gospel of Mark seems to be one long story about the Passion of Christ.

Early on in the Book of Mark, there is a sense that Jesus has already turned his face toward Jerusalem and is plodding slowly toward the city, toward his passion, toward his death. There is no birth narrative, the Gospel starts BOOM with the baptism of Jesus at age 30 and the beginning of his ministry. And then there is the steady drumbeat of his march to Jerusalem. The cross casts its shadow throughout the Book of Mark. As Biblical scholar William Willimon has said about Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, “Jesus is, from start to finish, the crucified one.”

Until we hear the story of the transfiguration in middle of the Book of Mark, only the demons Jesus has cast out of those who are possessed have identified him correctly as the Son of God. Jesus’ followers stumble and mumble behind him, wondering if he truly is the Messiah. Finally in Chapter 9, Mark shows us Jesus in

all his glory. Jesus may be on his way to the cross, but this is a shining moment on the journey. And still, the transfiguring glory is visible to only three of his disciples and even they cannot fully grasp what is happening. If you continuing reading on in the Book of Mark you see that the resistance, conflict and crises that dogged Jesus' ministry up until the moment of the transfiguration return after this moment of dazzling revelation.

Today we stand on the threshold of Lent, the season of the cross. For weeks we have been marching through the Book of Mark—the Gospel of the cross. Mark has been telling us a story of One who came to us, who touched the untouchables, turned his back on the wealth and conventional power, confronted demons and loved even unto death. In the Book of Mark we have encountered a Jesus who came to us with hands open in invitation, seeking us—patient with our inability to fully recognize and embrace him and still in pursuit of us.

But the Gospel of Mark is not interested in telling us about who we are and how we might relate to Jesus. The main interest of this, the first of the four Gospels to be written, is to tell us who Jesus is. Jesus, according to Mark, is the provoker of conflict, the one whose good news is met with a cross.

Then suddenly here, in the midst of the foreboding Gospel of Mark, here in what is considered the earliest and most accurate of the Gospels (it certainly is the leanest and sparest) here amidst the long walk to the cross, Mark gives us a mysterious, shining moment on a mountain. The heavens are opened and we see through and beyond the cross, through and beyond the conflict of Jesus' life and the rejection he experienced, through and beyond the confusion and questioning. We see what the demons have seen and said since Jesus' began his ministry—we see Jesus in dazzling, shimmering light. We are invited to and allowed to see Jesus in his glory. This rejected, soon-to-be crucified one is the Son of God, Emanuel, God with us.

WITH US is the glory of it all.

He is with us...hidden in plain view.

WITH US is the glory of the transfiguration.

He accepts us with all our literal, linear and limited thinking;

He loves us even when we cannot recognize him;

He will be strong even when we reject the idea that the Messiah will have to die like a common criminal;

He will keep confronting the demons that live within us;

He will respond with faithful, consistent compassion and forgiveness.

This is the glory of the transfiguration.

Through this one shining story in the midst of the Gospel of the cross we learn that Glory is not what we get when we finally rise above the muck and mire of this world.

Glory is not when we see with clarity that which is right before our eyes.

Glory is not when things are perfect, we understand completely, we have reached enlightenment.

Glory is not when we see and believe and are astounded, transported and grateful.

Glory is when God is revealed to us and we still don't get it fully but we catch a glimpse.

Glory is when we experience an inbreaking of God's kingdom on earth, although fleeting.

Glory is when God stoops and moves in among us and stands beside us and works for us and heals us and teaches us.....over and over again, in doses, until we see that what is hidden in plain view.

Mark's entire Gospel is focused on the cross...a drumbeat first quiet and distant but growing louder and louder with each passing verse as Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem and the cross that is waiting.

And yet Mark gives us, on the way to the cross—amid the rejection, conflict and crises that were the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry and life—a moment when the curtain is pulled back. The glorious vision present at the Transfiguration does not remove the cross, but it allows us to bear the cross. Even if we do not understand completely, even if Jesus remains hidden in plain view, we have glimpsed something that moves us fully, engages us deeply, and changes us significantly.

We may pause and question, we may want to build dwellings as we make concrete that which is mysterious, we may want to limit and contain this vision before our eyes. But even the most literal, linear and fully human of us knows that God has presented God's self to us.

That even with our limitations, even within the confines of our imagination, even with our limited vision and truncated understanding, God has chosen to come be with and among us and to show us God's self in all God's glory.

Glory is catching even a glimpse of the living Christ. As Peter did, in his frightened and overwhelmed state. Bless his heart.

Like the little boy climbing the big steps in the amphitheater Jesus--transfigured before three beloved disciples—was essentially asking: “Can you see me now?”

The glory of this story is that we have moments in our own lives when we—with all our limitations—say YES, I see you now.

I see you shimmering in the eyes of a loved one
I see you shining through the smile of an elder
I see you beaming in the face of a baby
I see you twinkling in the laugh of a child
I see you sparkling in the joy of a parent
I see you dazzling in the eyes of a lover.

For a moment, in passing, with a sideways glance or a quick double-take,
I see you God. Yes, I see you now.

The story of the transfiguration, dropped in the middle of the Book of Mark with its unrelenting walk to the cross, is a moment for us to see what is hidden in plain view, to say I see you now.

The story of the transfiguration, there in the middle of a Gospel considered an extended reflection on the crucifixion, is a moment to recognize that God stoops to be with us, to move among us, to stand beside us, to work for us, to heal and to teach us.

The story of the transfiguration, there in the center of a Gospel rushing headlong to Jerusalem, gives us an opportunity to say even with my limited vision, I do see you.

I see you now.

Amen.