



“Seeing the Transfigured Jesus”

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Mark 9:2-9

I'm not sure if you are aware of this, but I am the second-best ninja at Royal Lane. The youth and sponsors played a game on the final night we were at Midwinter Retreat last weekend. It's called ninja. Some of you may have seen the incriminating Facebook video of me playing ninja. If not, the cats out of the bag now. I am a ninja. I had never in my life played this game and I had a hard time understanding the rules. Oh, and I was the oldest person in the group too, so I think the youth decided to gang up on this old man. But, it appears I have ninja-like reflexes, unbeknownst to me and hilariously surprising to Amanda who saw the video later and laughed uncontrollably.

The rules of the game are that you have to make one move and ninja chop the hand or wrist of someone else in the circle. Once you make an offensive or defensive move, you have to stay in that position until your turn comes back around or you were chopped by someone else. Once one of your arms or hands is chopped, you have to put that arm behind your back and fight with only one hand. Then when that last hand is hit, you are out. In short, you have to quickly dodge your opponents attacks while planning your own counter attack. When the game moves quickly, it looks like a bunch of ninjas fighting.

Well, my inner fifteen-year-old was resurrected and somehow, I got my thirty-nine-year-old body to grant a speedy game exit to several youth. Before I knew what had happened, the ninja champion of champions, Samuel Quesada, and I were the final two in the match. If you've seen the video, we traded karate chops and ninja-like moves as if we were in a slow-motion Bruce Lee movie. Eventually, I felt bad that I was about to take Samuel's ninja champion title from him, and I let him win. Well, that's the story I'm telling people. Actually, he's just way younger and quicker than me. Also, after reviewing the video over and over again (because I wanted to find Samuel's weak spot for the next time we play) I noticed that after I went in for a ninja chop to Samuel's hand I took an extra move, which I wasn't supposed to do, and brought my hand back to my body. In an effort to be fair, I put that hand back out in front of Samuel. Well, he quickly pounced and karate-chopped me out of the game. I was so concerned with the rules and playing the game correctly that I took my eyes off of my opponent and missed the experience of the game. Oh well. Next time, Samuel! Next time!

We did have a good group of youth go on the midwinter retreat in Athens, Texas at Disciples Crossing Camp. Our own youth and the youth from all of the other churches in our camping association are indeed bright and thoughtful kids. Our topic for the weekend was the Great Commission. As you know, the Great Commission happens in the Gospel of Matthew, although there is a lesser known version in Mark too. But the Great Commission in Matthew is important because this critical command to his followers to go out and make disciples was given by a resurrected Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. It seems as if all of the important moments in

Matthew happened on a mountain. When Jesus defeated the tempting Satan in the wilderness, it happened on a mountain. When Jesus delivered the Beatitudes to his followers and taught them that they were blessed, it was on a mountain. When Jesus went to rejuvenate and pray, it was on a mountain. When he healed people who were sick and demon possessed, it was usually on a mountain. When he prayed and pleaded for God to take the cup of crucifixion away from him, he was on a mountain. When Jesus was put to death and the earth and the heavens grew dim, it was on a mountain. And, when Jesus returned to Galilee to pass on his authority to a group of doubting, fearful, yet commissioned disciples, it was on a mountain.

Mountaintop moments seemed to be where Jesus and God drew closer together. In our Gospel lesson for today, it is the place where Peter, James, and John encountered the transfigured Christ, glowing with divine light and purpose. But the problem is, Peter, the rule follower, the one who knew how the royal uprising should take place, the one who knew that a king would have to usher in the kingdom by force rather than through servant leadership, this Peter wanted to build some sukkots, some shelters. Peter, the rule follower, looked at the transfigured Jesus with his face glowing and the veil between heaven and earth made tantalizingly thin, and he didn't really see the transfigured Christ. C'mon! This was the time that the inner circle of disciples would come face to face with the prophets of old and the Messiah of today and all Peter could think about was the Jewish law of building shelters to commemorate this divine occurrence. He took his eyes off Jesus and wanted to get busy doing something rather than rest in the spiritual glow. The transfiguration was the moment when Jesus yearned to be noticed, when the Messianic Secret, the hiddenness of Christ through the Gospel of Mark was upended and the divine authority of Jesus revealed. This was the time when Jesus was seen, I mean really seen. And Peter took his eyes off Jesus and was not transformed.

I'm in a Facebook group with a bunch of ministers, and one of the clergy in the group mentioned going on a trip to the Middle East. While in Bethlehem, she was a guest of an Orthodox priest at a newly constructed church in the area. Inside this new church was a large wall or mural with icons on both sides of the church. She noticed that there was an icon of the Transfiguration of Jesus. That icon was titled "metamorphosis." Metamorphosis means "to change forms." Transfiguration means the same thing, to change form.

The transfiguration changed the secret Jesus of Mark into a powerful presence for justice. The transfiguration was a very different kind of revealing for the writer of the Gospel of Mark. No longer was Jesus's power and presence diminished. No longer did a distant star light the way. No longer did a gentle dove alight on Jesus. No longer was the illumination of Jesus's work of justice and reconciliation and redemption and hope hidden behind drab clothing and a secret mission. No, Jesus became a beacon, his clothes dazzled and his face radiated. He was like a lighthouse on the rocky cliffs, piercing the darkness, the fog, the confusion, the doubt, and fear. The illumination of Jesus and the heavenly voice that thundered from above was present for all the witnesses to hear, to see, to experience. So, on this Sunday, this Transfiguration Sunday, there is a promise that Jesus can and will be noticed, that Jesus demands to be noticed. In this unique and almost misplaced encounter with Christ, as a transfigured body clothed in shining garments, "Jesus insists upon being seen," says novelist Mary Gordon - which means the transfiguration narrative "can be read as the celebration of the visible." Today, it is our gift and our calling to see the transfigured Jesus.

Seeing a transfigured Jesus is important for us because when we notice the transformed Jesus, we, like Peter, James, and John, find ourselves on holy ground, in the company of those who inspire change and demand change. After all, Jesus appeared alongside Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets in Jewish history. These great prophets were voices and agents of just and righteous transformation because of their intimacy with God. Moses has face-to-face chats with God and even glimpsed God's exposed underside or belly. Moses was transformed because he rested in the vulnerability of the divine. And Elijah encountered God in the strange "sound of sheer silence." The fears, distractions, and evils of the world fell still and Elijah was transformed by the closeness of God. When one is so near the divine, everything changes. Impossibilities dissolve. Justice rises. Transformation happens. After all, the Bible says that both of these prophets successfully avoided death and were somehow carried directly into heaven, Moses as he was viewing the promised land from the mountaintop and Elijah as the chariot of fire shuttled him to his eternal home.

Both of the prophets, like Jesus, labored, struggled, and suffered to help the Jewish people remain faithful as they battled to bring a transformed people closer to God. These three prophets sought to keep the people of God hopeful as they suffered the burdens of abusive political systems. Closeness with God energized the prophets of old in their service to others, equipping them to know and pursue justice and righteousness and to be agents of transformation. The lives of Moses, Elijah, and the transfigured Jesus revealed to the disciples that a closeness to God isn't something to be hoarded; it called for them to live out that transformation in the world.

And so, at the transfiguration, Jesus stood in impressive company, sharing the moment with two others who knew what it was like to share close communion with God and to frustrate that pesky and seemingly unyielding boundary between life and death. And as a church, it is our job to bring life to those who experience death. We are to reflect the glowing face of the transfigured Jesus and welcome all people to the table, all people to experience the transformation that can happen when we draw near to God. Walter Brueggemann says that "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair." If we stop for a second and ignore the rules, and ignore the distractions of trying to build shelters, and ignore the busyness of our lives, then we, like Peter, James, and John can be transformed and take the transfigured Christ with us down the mountain and into the deepest valleys and the painful sorrows and the oppressive places.

Will we be a transfigured church, a transformed body of believers? Will we give up on the illusions of a drab and tame Jesus and see a transfigured Christ that glows in glory? The bright light of the Transfiguration affirms life, a light that shines ahead into Lent to keep that season in perspective, never without hope and confidence. This light speaks a promise that God is here and that God is knowable, that God seeks relationship and wants to be seen. The power of Jesus flashes into our world in a new way today. No more secret Jesus society where we focus on following the rules and hiding our lights under bushels, or being a closed community, or keeping our mouths shut. It is time to move into Lent with the transfigured Jesus lighting our way, so that we can be in communion with God, transforming, transfiguring, and bringing life to the world.

Amen.