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Roland Park Presbyterian Church  
Transfiguration (Year B09)

Psalm 50: 1-6  
Mark 9: 2-9

### **Downward Mobility**

I am going to begin today's sermon with a confession of sorts. (As a pastor, that's always a fun way to make your congregation nervous.) It's not the sordid type though. It's more of an acknowledgment really. You see, *I don't think that pastors and people whose jobs it is to study the Bible are any less confused by scripture than the average person sitting in the pew or reading the Bible. The truth is we are just more used to it!*

Apparently today's passage is confounding for many pastors. I was with a group of colleagues recently and we were talking about upcoming sermons. They all agreed, they were not looking forward to Transfiguration Sunday and, potentially, having to preach on today's Gospel lesson. They were considering one of the other passages prescribed by the lectionary, or, perhaps even, straying from the lectionary. (I know, it's scandalous, isn't it?!) Here's the odd thing though. I love this passage. It just makes sense to me, and I am not exactly sure why that is. I would have no problem preaching on this passage year after year after year. By my calculation this is my 6<sup>th</sup> sermon on Transfiguration Sunday, and every year I have been surprised by a different layer to the story.

Last year, I preached on Matthew's version of the transfiguration story and emphasized the theme of change, and how Jesus was changed and how the disciples who were there with him were changed and how we, as followers of Christ, must allow ourselves to be changed. Essentially, it was a message on how openness is essential to faith. That also happened to be my first Sunday serving as your pastor and it seemed like a fitting theme. The temptation here then, would be to revisit that theme and review how we have changed over the past year. But to do that would be to ignore the possibility that this passage, now in Mark's version, would have something new to say to us.

So let's try to revisit the story, with fresh eyes and ears. Jesus selects three disciples, Peter, James, and John, and takes them on a journey up a mountain. Imagine, being chosen among the disciples, to spend time alone with Jesus. What a privilege! And, as it turns out, this is more than just a little trek. Something happens on that mountaintop that is hard to explain. The Gospel writers tell us "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became a dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And then, there appeared to them Elijah with Moses."

The Gospel writer seems to be making it pretty clear that this whole scene is for the benefit of the disciples. *They* were chosen as witnesses. All of this happened "*before them*" and the voice from the cloud addresses *them*, not Jesus, not Moses or Elijah, but *the disciples*. You may remember this voice from Jesus' baptism. It is not a coincidence! It's like pieces of a puzzle being given to the disciples, to figure out who Jesus is and what he is doing. Okay, here is another piece, do you get it now?

And the message is pretty clear: Jesus is the one for whom they have been hoping and waiting. Moses and Elijah are used here symbolically to represent the Law and the Prophets. That Jesus not only appears in their company, but is singled out by the voice is meant to be the visual representation of Jesus' words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17).

But the fact is that even with this wonderful mountaintop experience, Peter, James and John, really don't seem to understand what is going on anymore than they did before. The Gospel writer says that they didn't know what to say because they were terrified. Yet, at the same time it must have been a good kind of terrified, because Peter makes a bold suggestion. They should build tents and stay up there on the mountaintop for as long as they possibly could to bask in the glow of this wonderful, terrifying event.

They should memorialize this amazing occasion and not let it slip from their grasp. But Jesus' response is swift and decisive. That is not what they are called to do, he tells them. They must take this experience with them and go back down into the valley with the others.

I think it is Peter's suggestion that makes this passage so clear for me. I think it is the disciples' desire to stay up there with Jesus, to savor that moment, to not leave, that I understand so well and makes this passage so compelling for me. It makes me wonder, when, in my life, have I stalled too long? What have been my mountaintop experiences and how have they shaped me and how have I responded? Have I carried them with me and found ways to share them with others?

It also makes me wonder about what it means to be the Church. The disciples, as the first followers of Jesus are the precursor to the Church. And so it strikes me that just as the scene described here is for their benefit, the Gospel writer is also sharing it for our benefit. We are represented in this story by Peter, James and John. The challenge for us, then, is the same as it was for the disciples. It is the challenge to resist the temptation of setting up tents when we are called to move on.

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Last Saturday I attended the "Big Event." Some of you may be aware the Presbytery, which is the regional body of our denomination, sponsors an annual event for all of its churches' leaders and members. They usually bring in a speaker of note. This year we were fortunate to have two: Diana Butler Bass and Graham Standish. Now these are not household names, but in Presbyterian and mainline denomination circles, they are widely recognized. Bass wrote a book called *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, which is based on her conclusions from a four year study of 50 healthy, vital mainline congregations. Amidst hundreds of other attempts to explain why mainline Protestant

denominations are in decline by trying to figure out what is wrong, she decided to find churches that were doing well and learn what it is that they are doing right. The Rev. Graham Standish's church is one of the congregations her study lifts up. It is a Presbyterian Church, much like ours, just north of Pittsburgh. When Graham first started there, the congregation was about our size. Now, 13 years later, it is double the size. It is not a mega-church by any means, not even a large church. It is what we would call medium sized. But, as most churches are losing members year after year, this congregation has been steadily gaining.

Now it would be misleading and false to judge whether or not a congregation is healthy and vital simply by whether or not it is gaining members alone. Dr. Bass's study includes many churches that were steady in terms of the membership numbers, but whose health and vitality were showing in other ways: growing attendance and participation, growing opportunities in education and mission and so on. But even growth, in this more general sense, is not enough.

What she found is that the thing all of these churches have in common is they provide experiences of both the mountaintop and the valley. And they all practice what Henri Nouwen once referred to as a *downward mobility*<sup>1</sup>. Another way to state this is that their actions are grounded in their experience of God. The mountaintop is where the disciples had their close encounter with the divine, something for which we all long. However, the passage is also very clear that we are not called to stay there. We must take that experience with us back down into the valley, where we live and work and play.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), June 28<sup>th</sup>.

It is tempting to think that our job, as a church, is to pitch our tents on the top of the mountain; to think that the life of faith is only about experiencing God. The danger with that is it makes faith a purely private affair. If that were the case, then why even bother with church at all? Yet, we can go too far in the other direction as well and make church life itself the object of our devotion. For some, these mountaintop experiences aren't necessarily about God. They can just be an idealized period of time in the life of the congregation, past or present. But again, the call is not to stay put, but to keep on moving. We cannot live in the past, not if we want to be a church instead of a museum; not if we want to be followers of Christ instead of curators. It is okay to be a community of memory, but we must also be one of practice.

But remember what else this passage says. The practice of the community is not grounded in its own experience or knowledge, but in the knowledge and its own experience of God. The journey into the valley comes *only after* the one to the top of the mountain. And this is where many of us need the most growth, as individuals and as communities of faith. The church, too often, has turned inward and become more interested in maintaining itself as an institution than being God's agent of transformation for individuals and society. Church should be the place where we are given the opportunity to practice the vital link in our faith between the mountaintop and the valley, but we have divorced the practice of faith from the business of the church. And when we do this, we lose the core of the very place that helps make our faith vital and relevant. We need to ask ourselves, before we make decisions, do we pray? Do we seek to spend time with God? How do our experience and knowledge of God impact us? What difference does it make in our lives? Do we practice Jesus' brand of downward mobility?