

## WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE VALLEY

Mark 9:2-9

There's a game that I've played and led many times over the years as a way to get people into small groups, or as a way to help folks get to know one another. I call it 4 Corners, but I'm sure it has other names. Without getting into the nitty gritty details of the game, your basic task is to listen to four different things that the leader lists aloud and select the one that you like best or best connect to. For example, I could say, "If you're out in nature, the place you'd most like to be is: by a lake, in a forest, in the mountains, or on a sandy beach." Then you would choose which of those four options you most connect with. And you can only choose one. And you can't adapt the options to better suit your needs or interests—you just choose the best fit: lake, forest, mountain, or beach. Now, whenever these options are given, I always choose lake. I grew up in Ontario where I never lived far from a lake and I'm sure I've never experienced—since birth—a summer where I didn't spend time swimming or canoeing on a lake, and most winters I get the chance to skate on one. But, to be honest, part of the reason my answer is always lake is because I had never actually experienced all four of those game options: up until 8 years ago, I had never been to a mountain. And even then, the first mountain I experienced was part of the Blue Ridge mountain range in North Carolina, which I've since discovered true mountain enthusiasts feel aren't "really" mountains. Now, for any of you who did select "mountain" in your heads, you'll be pleased to know that I've since expanded my mountain experiences. And, I've gotta say, mountains are pretty spectacular.

I had the gift of going to and hiking along a number of mountains in the Dolomites, which is the part of the Alps that dips into northern Italy. It was a literal mountaintop experience like no other. I looked out at these incredible vistas and suddenly understood the word "breathtaking" in a way I never had before. I constantly had to remind myself that what I was seeing wasn't a photo, but real life. Because when you're processing that kind of beauty and scale and unending sky at such an incredible height for the first time, it's difficult to comprehend. You feel as if everything is so far away, and yet there's this sense, too, that if you just reach out you'll be able to touch it. It was magnificent to be so high up, to see so much beauty, and often without railings or special platforms to keep you contained, which also made it equally terrifying—especially when you've got your 4 month old strapped to the front of you.

It was this amazing conversation with God that didn't require any words. Just sight. Just the unveiling of my own limited understanding of the way the world could be seen and known, of how God could be seen and known.

In the Christian faith, we often talk about mountaintop experiences. These could be anything from renewing nature retreats to high energy summer camp experiences. The key to the mountaintop encounter is experiencing God in a new way, experiencing the transcendent, experiencing a shift in perspective that will change our understanding of

faith, of hope, of love, of forgiveness, of grace, of goodness. It feels right to be on the mountaintop. It's a place where, even though there may be some terrifying or fear-inducing elements, we know we are experiencing something transcendent and so we long to stay, or to return again and again. Think of your own mountaintop experiences: perhaps a specific time in nature; a feeling of safety after a scary or uncertain situation; the birth of a child; the sounds of a particular piece of music, of voices arranged in harmony, perhaps including your own; a feeling of total and complete peace; a lesson from a speaker or author whose words resounded within you and opened your eyes to new things; a connection with people whose presence brings forward new life and understanding; a time when something gave your weary soul a shake and got you thinking or loving or growing in a new way. When these moments happen, it's understandable that we want to hold onto that feeling of goodness for as long as we can.

I wanted to stay up in those mountains for as long as possible. It felt difficult to come down, to tear my eyes away from such magnificence, to let go of feeling so unburdened as I focused only on what I saw and felt most immediately within me.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration is a mountaintop story. Jesus and three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—hike to the top of a mountain. And while just summiting a mountain would feel like a huge accomplishment and reason to feel alive and connected to the earth and those you travelled with, the disciples are faced with a surprising and unexpected conclusion to their trip skyward: Jesus is transfigured before them. Jesus becomes dazzling white and is suddenly in conversation with two important figures of faith who, in their time, had their own mountaintop experiences: Moses and Elijah. While it is an incredible and breathtaking experience to witness, it is also terrifying for the disciples and they are left mostly speechless. Peter, not knowing what to say or do in this unexpected but utterly awe-filled moment, and knowing that it is in some way significant and relevant and good, suggests that they make some dwellings in order to stay and work through this amazing experience together—to stay and worship God in this high and holy place. But before Peter gets a response from Jesus a cloud overshadows them all and a voice speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Listen to him. Up to this point, the disciples—all of them—have been rather blind to the reality of what is coming. They are resistant to Jesus' teaching about the cross that awaits him in Jerusalem. They are resistant to being the ones who must "take up the cross" after Jesus' suffering and death. They are resistant to seeing the promise that God's rule will overwhelm the human imperial powers of this world. But on this mountaintop their eyes are opened and they see Jesus in a new light—quite literally.

We might sometimes use the words "transfigure" and "transform" interchangeably, but there is a distinction. To be transfigured is to be changed outwardly, to have a different outward appearance. To be transformed is to be changed from within. We often associate transformation with a change of heart or mind that leads to a new perspective or understanding. Jesus' transfiguration didn't change who Jesus was on the inside; that

remained the same. But the change in his outward appearance—a dazzling white such as no human eye had ever beheld—this is what helped the disciples to be transformed. Jesus isn't just a great teacher and leader who will help lead the way to liberation, he is far more than that: Jesus is divine. And this is confirmed by the voice from the clouds: "This is my Son, the Beloved." This is a monumental event for the disciples to witness. It opens their eyes to something they had been resisting; it removes their blindness about who Jesus says he is and what will happen to him and why.

Perhaps, then, it's not what Peter said in this moment of both amazement and terror that is important, perhaps it's what Peter was feeling that holds the most meaning. Here on the mountain, he is removed from the reality of what's below: struggle, foreign occupation, conflict with religious authorities, unclean spirits, demanding crowds, continual travel to new towns. Escaping the chaos of what's down below makes lingering a bit longer in the mountain seem worthwhile. He feels safe here; he can catch his breath here; he sees an opportunity to revel in both the terror and glory of what is all around him because he is truly in the presence of God here. But none of us gets to stay on the mountaintop forever. There is a mission and a ministry to engage in, which takes on all new meaning after this experience of the transcendent.

So, armed with this new understanding and perspective of just how Jesus will bring the Kingdom of Heaven nearer, with new hope for change in an oppressed society, the disciples descend from the mountain. With opened eyes, with transformed hearts, they must process and prepare for what they know is coming. They must take what they've learned back into the world. This is something we all do when we descend the mountain. We have been in some way changed which affects how we engage with the world around us, hopefully for the better. We must take what we've learned or discovered or felt back down with us and apply it to our living.

But what if we haven't been up on that mountaintop in years? Most of the time we're in the valley. Sometimes just the ho-hum valley of the everyday, sometimes the darker valley of shadow and death. So what are we to take from this amazing mountaintop story and experience as we watch it from below, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus' light, but finding it difficult as other things catch our eyes, our attention, our hearts... things like war, homelessness, starvation, addiction, fear, lack of motivation, jealousy, loneliness, guilt, shame, feeling consumed with work or school... On the mountaintop these problems seem to melt away and we want to be where we feel safe; like Peter, we want to build a dwelling place and stay.

But that's not how real life works, is it? We can't just choose to climb a mountain with Jesus and tune out every other element of our lives and the world for any great length of time. And Jesus doesn't want us to do that, either.

The disciples weren't sent back down that mountain alone, Jesus came with them. Jesus is focused on his mission; he is focused on transforming hearts, but he is also focused on arrest, trial, and conflict with religious authorities. He is focused on crucifixion and resurrection. In other words, Jesus is focused on human need, human

suffering, human mortality. He is focused on bringing the Kingdom of God nearer. We don't need to have a life-altering summit-reaching experience in order to know peace and wholeness, because Jesus comes down that mountain to meet us in our very need. Jesus comes down and meets us in the shadow of illness, loneliness, grief, fear, suffering, sin, racism, political divisions, war, starvation, confusion. He meets us in the valley of our everyday living, hoping, wondering, and loving. He shows us how to forgive. He shows us grace. He shows us how to love right to the very end.

While mountaintop experiences are wonderful and powerful and something that I hope everyone gets to participate in at some point, or many points, in their lives, we don't need to reach the summit in order to find transformation. We don't need to reach for the holiness of God up on that mountaintop because Jesus is right down here beside us. Through the transfiguration, Jesus makes mountaintops just as attainable as valleys, and makes valleys just as significant as mountaintops. You do not need to make that hike to the top in order to achieve wholeness or holiness because Jesus has already come to dwell with us wherever we are, whether that be in the valley of our shadows or in the height of our rejoicing or in the mess of our chaos or in our confrontation with death.

Jesus tells his disciples over and over again that he is journeying toward the new thing that God is doing among us. God speaks from the cloud saying, "This is my son... listen to him." If we listen, too, if we open our eyes to the transfiguration and our own potential for transformation, then we will see and hear and know the ways that newness is all around: in comfort where there is suffering, in forgiveness where there is sin, in life where there is death. Jesus has come to dwell with us, bringing words of promise of healing and wholeness, of life overcoming death. And, in doing this, joins us to one another through the Spirit and emboldens us on our journey together as the body of Christ, doing for one another what Christ is already doing for each of us in the mountaintop of our everyday living. Amen.