

A Glimpse of Heaven

Mark 9:2-9

² Six days later, 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, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ 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." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

⁹ 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.

I must confess that I am a slow learner. I have been preaching sermons on Transfiguration Sundays for 8 years, this being the 9th, and I think I am finally figuring out what may be going on here!

One question for us: If you or I knew that we were going to die in the next 6 to 8 weeks, who would you want to talk to? If you or I knew that we were going to die in the next 6 to 8 weeks, with who would you want to discuss your situation? If you or I knew that we were going to die in the next 6 to 8 weeks, who would you want to encourage you along the way?

This scripture sort of reminds me of the book by Mitch Albom named *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. The central character Eddie had lived a life of disappointment; he had not achieved his dreams. He misunderstood the value of his life and his actions. In the book, it is not until he died that he understood the contributions he had made. Unlike in the book where Eddie went to heaven; on the Mountain of Transfiguration, heaven came down to Jesus.

The boundary zones between the human and the divine are both disorienting and revealing. Between heaven and earth, the everyday cues and perspectives that tell us who we are and how the world works no longer operate, but we may

glimpse a new view of reality that transforms our understanding and refashions our world. In our scripture the transfiguration of Jesus confused and terrified his disciples, but the heavenly voice that spoke from a cloud confirmed that Jesus is not only the Christ, as Peter had confessed (8:29), but God's own Beloved Son and affirmed that his word of the cross were true. Everything in this episode—Jesus' transformation, the appearance of Elijah and Moses, Peter's babbling attempt to be useful—led up to the moment when God spoke from the cloud that suddenly overshadowed them, naming Jesus and commanding the disciples to "Listen to him!"

The transfiguration is a historic and important moment. As at Jesus' baptism, when the heavens were torn open and the divine voice first named that Jesus is God's Beloved Son (1:11), or when the "young man" announced to the women at the tomb that Jesus is risen (16:1-8), God entered the story to uncover what had been hidden from human perception or recognition. Mark located the transfiguration within a section of the Gospel (8:22-10:52) that weaves together teaching and healings focused on sight and blindness—especially the disciples' own "blindness" and resistance to Jesus' teaching concerning the cross that awaited him in Jerusalem. Against this canvas of blindness and misunderstanding, the transfiguration dazzled the senses with images of unearthly white clothing (9:3b), the presence of Elijah and Moses, and the overshadowing cloud that brought revelation. Mark recounts the transfiguration as an event that is for the disciples and is told through their eyes: Jesus led Peter, James, and John up the mountain and was transfigured "before them" (9:2); Elijah and Moses "appear to them" (9:4); Mark described their reactions and emotions (9:5-6); the cloud "overshadows them" (9:7); the voice from the cloud addressed them (9:7); and the end of the vision is described in terms of what they saw when they looked around (9:8). The

whole scene, in other words, was addressed to any disciple struggling to see, hear, comprehend, and believe the gospel reality.

I believe this scripture teaches us that listening is important. We must learn to listen to each other and listen to God. In my 30s I attended a series of trainings designed to teach church leaders to listen. We think we listen, but too often we are busy thinking of our next response rather than being fully present in the moment and hearing what the other person is trying to tell us.

The divine voice spoke directly to the disciples: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (9:7). Listen to what? The voice from the cloud imparted no new, revelatory information, but directed the disciples' attention back to what they had already heard from Jesus himself, and would again hear in what followed. The revelatory content of the vision lay in Jesus' own words, actions, and destiny. The first passion prediction (8:31), an extended teaching on the necessity of "taking up the cross" and "losing life" for the sake of the gospel (8:34-38), and the provocative claim that "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (9:1) immediately precede the transfiguration.

These statements invited the disciples to embrace the consequences that face those who challenge human imperial power, while they also promised that God's rule will overwhelm the powers of this world, definitively at the cross, which is at once the preeminent symbol of Roman domination and the climactic expression of God's liberating power. The transfiguration not only confirms Jesus' status as God's Beloved Son, but underlines, with disruptive splendor, God's affirmation of Jesus' way of the cross. As Jesus stood alongside Elijah and Moses, his word about the cross stood alongside the Law and the Prophets.

Another thing we learn is heaven is a place where God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are present and speaking. Heaven is the place where you are secure and in

the presence of the divine. Other symbolic images and cues confirm and extend these associations. The six days, the three witnesses, the ascent of a mountain, the transfiguration itself, the cloud, and God's voice from the cloud all recall the story of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets containing the Law (Exod. 24:9-18). Jesus' white garments recall the divine courtroom scene in Daniel, where earthly empires are put on trial (Dan. 7:9), and foreshadow the white clothing of the martyrs (cf. Rev. 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13), as well as the appearance of the "young man" at the tomb (Mark 16:5). Both Elijah—the forerunner (cf. 9:11-13)—and Moses beheld the glory of God on mountains during times of trial (Exod. 24; 34:29-35; 1 Kgs. 19:11-18) and, according to Jewish tradition, both ascended to heaven at their deaths, as Jesus would be raised and vindicated by God (cf. 9:9). Their presence in this scene places Jesus' mission, identity, and destiny in correlation with theirs—but his destiny would entail the conquest of death.

Peter had recently confessed that Jesus is the Christ (8:29), but here addressed him as "Rabbi" (cf. 11:21, 14:45), perhaps because he could not yet form a congruent image of Jesus' messianic identity and his teaching about the cross. Peter's words to Jesus had the feel of words out of place. His offer to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah sounded as if he wanted to memorialize the moment or perhaps serve as the court architect for the divine conference. In any case, his offer was a mask for the disciples' fear (9:6). Was it fear of divine presence, or fear of the cross?

Not everyone will understand your heavenly experience because they will not have experienced what you have experienced. Jesus commanded the disciples to keep silent until after they had witnessed his death and resurrection (9:9, cf. 8:30). Just as they did not yet accept or understand the necessity or meaning of the cross, Mark noted that they did not understand what he meant when he spoke about the

resurrection from the dead (9:10). They had enlightenment in association with Jesus' transfiguration, but still they perceived mostly the world's darkness (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-6). Only after Jesus was crucified and raised could the disciples comprehend that a new world was coming into being, where the threat of death no longer dominates human imagination and where God's Son liberates those who follow his path to the cross. **Stanley P. Saunders**

As those few chosen disciples had a glimpse of heaven, so we can have a glimpse of heaven as we worship, listen and connect with the divine. May it be so for each of us.

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