

Transfigured

Mark 9:2-9

Every year we visit this text or a similar one. It is a familiar scene, so familiar that we wonder whether there is anything different that God can teach us from this passage. When we read it with new eyes and ears we understand that fear and terror was everywhere! The Gospel of Mark tells us that Peter was so terrified by the transfiguration that he did not know what to say. The Gospel of Matthew ([17:1-8](#)) reports that Jesus touched the disciples because they were overcome with fear at the transfiguration. And the Gospel of Luke records that the disciples were terrified after they entered the cloud along with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

Mark makes it hard to ignore the scene, which lies squarely in the center of Mark's Gospel. The transfiguration draws our memories to other similar biblical theophanies. 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 will 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 will entail the conquest of death.

God, in the voice from heaven tells Peter (and James and John) to "Listen to him!"—that is, to believe Jesus' word (which Peter had disputed) that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection are integral to his messianic mission, and that the way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him (cf. Mark 8:34-38). Although his followers did not understand; Jesus' devotion to the reign of God on earth inevitably provoked "the powers"—the fear, hatred, greed, falsehood, violence, and despair that pervade and distort everything human—to make their oppressive, murderous response, even if this response also, ironically, made possible the disclosure of the triumphant power of God's nonviolent love in their very midst.

The transfiguration is therefore also a powerful word to *us* to take up our cross and follow Christ, to walk in his way that in one way or another will provoke the powers against us, but that ultimately discloses the eternal truth and trustworthiness of God's love and justice in the midst of evil.

It does not mean that we should seek or regard suffering as a spiritual good in itself or as inherently saving and redemptive—as centuries of misguided Christian theology and piety have often maintained. Jesus did not die because his suffering as such could purge the world of sin and evil. He died because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to nonviolent love, justice, and truth. His passion revealed, not only the "evilness of evil"—its intrinsic, deadly violence—but the transforming power of divine love, a powerful, assertive love that does not dominate and defeat evil so

much as challenge, expose, and seek to transform it. Such love alone ultimately carries the day; it alone is truly redemptive and saving.

Christians are therefore not called to exhibit a passive love that simply tries to be good and avoid evil. Nor is the way of the cross a private bearing of personal woes for the sake of Jesus. It is rather a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world's power game of domination, exploitation, greed, and deception. The transfiguration story is a call to affirm the ultimate truth of this contrary claim of God and God's way of salvation, and to begin living it with all our heart, soul, and strength in the confidence that Jesus' nonviolent way is truly the way of salvation, healing, and eternal life.

We are sometimes like Peter, we want to build tabernacles; or like the quarreling disciples, we want our little egos to bask in Jesus' power and glory; with its underlying egoistic power grab. Jesus' mission was not to make a big deal of himself or to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority, and prestige through identification with him. It was rather to point through and beyond himself to God and to God's coming reign on earth, and to invite his followers to find their voice in bearing witness to this transforming, redemptive God (see [16:8](#)).

High on the mountain, in a moment of numinous splendor, Jesus was indeed clothed in the dazzling light of God—but only briefly, and to a select few. The heavenly mystery was unveiled, only to be veiled again on the cross—and to be *revealed* again, not in the glorious light of a resurrection appearance, but in an empty tomb with a solitary human figure announcing his resurrection and return to Galilee.

As we read the Gospel of Mark we observe a mixture of high and low experiences. Throughout the Gospel we hear Jesus speak about his death and

resurrection, suffering and glory. We all want to travel to the mountaintop and experience the transfiguration with Jesus. Yet the text eventually moves us back down the mountain into the normal routine of life. Even if we have a mountaintop experience, we often do not know how to share it with the faith community. At the same time, the faith community may not know how to receive an experience with God on the mountaintop. Sometimes we react just like Peter and are left speechless out of fear. Other times we do not think anyone will believe our story, even if we feel safe to share it. The thought that our experiences in life are linked with God's story unfolding in the world can be reassuring, but it can also be terrifying! We may even experience theophanies without recognizing them at first. Subsequently, we do not attach much significance to these events. Still others of us may be able to report hearing the voice of God, but, out of fear, we do not feel comfortable sharing our experience with the faith community. We, as a faith community, we need to become safe places for all of us to explore the various ways that the identity of Jesus is being revealed. **Donald Booz and Stanley P. Saunders**

The story is told in the book *Stories for the Heart* of the Passerby. A woman keeps seeing an elderly man walking near a school and finally gets up her nerves to talk him who he is. She invites her to him home where she discovers a few things about him: 1) he is an artist, who was always discouraged by his parents because they didn't believe that would make him a living; 2) his wife and he had not family and she had major health issues; and 3) they survived on Meals on Wheels which came 3 days a week and they made two days of miles off each delivery, but had to fend for themselves on Mondays. The woman decided that she would bless them by providing there Monday meals. The first time she arrived with the meal she

discovered they were having challenges as the man's shirt had a burn and soup was spilled on the stove. Her gift made the spilled unnecessary and prayer calmed the situation. But what the woman found was the she was even more blessed by the experience than the elder couple whom she helped.

Two things I hope that we can take away from this story and our scripture. First, like Jesus we go through difficult times, but that does not mean that you and I are not beloved by God. Jesus faced the cross as an innocent person, who died willingly so that we would have salvation. But like Jesus we have the promise of God's love. The transfiguration not only confirmed Jesus' status as God's Beloved Son, but underlines God's affirmation of Jesus' way of the cross.

Last we learn that we were not designed to face our difficulties alone. Jesus stood alongside Elijah and Moses. When Jesus needed to think through the consequences of his sacrifice on the cross, he looked to those who went before him for comfort and encouragement. Too often we think we must be the "Lone Ranger." Recently one of my coworkers was dealing with the illness of her mother. We were able to cry together and I tried to ensure her that she did not have to be a super-strong, super-Christian. God knows what you are going through, and God is not disappointed when we need a helping hand.