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Mark 9:2-9

The Glory of No Mountain Top

There is a mysterious element in life which defies explanation and rational understanding. Modern science, far from eliminating mystery, actually discovers more and more that we live in a mysterious universe. What could be more mysterious than the power of microscopic genes to transmit to your offspring the color of your hair or the shape of your nose? What could be more mysterious than the 'black holes' that astronomers tell us exist in space-- matter collapsed to a state so dense that it has become invisible, and inside which time and space no longer exist? No one has done more to explain our mysterious universe than Albert Einstein, but in 1930 he wrote: 'The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.... He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.'

The Bible is a mysterious book; it faithfully reflects the mysterious element in the world and in life as we know it. The world of the Bible is a world where the invisible world and the visible world penetrate one another. There is no thick wall separating heaven from earth. There is traffic between the two.

Look at this incident in the life of Jesus that we call the Transfiguration. What a mysterious experience! It was the end of a busy day, and in the company of Peter, James, and John the Lord decided to journey up a mountainside to pray. The choice of the three companions was not accidental. Seven or eight months later the same inner circle of the disciples were to be the companions of Christ as he went into the Garden of Gethsemane. The night passed, and Christ continued to pray. Suddenly in the early hours of the morning they saw the Lord transformed as they had never seen him before. And they saw Moses and Elijah appear

and enter into deep conversation with Christ about his coming death. Then a luminous cloud enshrouded them, and out of the cloud the heavenly Father spoke. His words were identical to those spoken at Christ's baptism, although this time they were directed specifically to these three disciples, and through them to the first-century church, and through the New Testament to us today. "This is my beloved Son; listen to him". Could anything be more wonderful and mysterious than that?

It is this element of mystery, awe, and wonder that I now want to focus on this morning. God intended our worship of him to be a transfiguring experience for us. When we worship God the windows of heaven may be opened; we join the saints and angels in heaven; the glory of the presence of the Lord overshadows us; and in the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments we actually see, feel, hear and touch the risen and glorified Christ. It can happen. It may happen for you this morning. It has happened to me! I come each week to this sanctuary hoping and praying and expecting to encounter Christ and see him in his ascended glory. That is why worship is so important for me. In worship characterized by awe, wonder, and joy; worship that balances freedom and form, ardor and order I have see Christ in his glory and I have been energized and transfigured.

Now what do I want God to accomplished through this sermon? I want the Holy Spirit to impress upon each one of us the need for worship. A.W. Tozer has written that worship is the missing jewel in the crown of evangelicalism. May the Spirit of God speak to you this morning if that jewel is missing in your life; the jewel of worship. May you covenant with God to worship regularly with his people, to come to this sanctuary,

dedicated to the worship and glory of God, with holy expectation of seeing Christ in his glory. This is what God desires: regular worship, expectant worship, reverent worship, God centered worship.

This strange, mysterious incident, the Transfiguration of Christ, assures us that heaven is not far from earth; the eternal world is very near to us and it is the main purpose in our worship, both private, and corporate, to draw near to God. Peter, James and John were three hard-nosed businessmen. They were fishermen, not airy idealists or dreamy philosophers. They had work to do, fish to catch, bills to pay, accounts to balance. But on the slopes of Mount Hermon they suddenly realized that they were in a realm that superceded all of that; where the presence and the glory of God were far more real than the grass at their feet, their ledger books in their office, or the snow covered mountain peaks around them.

Heaven is not some far-off sphere beyond the stars; heaven is very close; it interpenetrates the material universe in which we live; it touches us at every point. At any moment a common ordinary bush may burst into the flame of the presence of God. At any moment, we may hear in the wind that howls in winter a whisper from beyond time. Even in prison, Samuel Rutherford was able to say, "Jesus Christ came into my cell last night, and every stone flashed like a ruby."

But it is in the act of corporate worship that God, so often, comes closest to us. In the act of corporate worship common water that we ordinarily use to wash our clothes and bathe in becomes the water of rebirth and the gateway into the kingdom of God. Common bread and wine become for us the communion of the body and blood of Christ. Common ,

ordinary words, words that are used doily in our business and professions, words that we use to curse and swear, in worship become the means by which God speaks to us and tells us of eternal things. And as we sing and praise God in song we join with all the saints and angels in heaven in their worship. "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine".

How can worship become for us a gateway to heaven and a mountain-top experience? The first condition of worship that is transfiguring is *silence*. When we pause and make a period of silence in our lives the nearness of the eternal world can be realized. I recently came across the bulletin of a church and on its cover were the following words for those who came to worship: "Welcome to *your* Service. As you enter will you please join in silent prayer, closing out the distractions of the world and ask God's Blessing upon this Service for you and your fellow worshippers." That's good advice to all of us when we come to worship.

You may live in a seaside cottage within the sound of the surf, but you will never hear the breaking of the waves if you have a transistor radio blaring out every hour of the day. You have to switch off the radio to hear the sea. Why are we so afraid of silence? Why have we this compulsive urge to immerse ourselves, for most of our waking life, in a medley of sound? "All the evils of life", the great mathematician Pascal said, "have fallen upon us because we will not sit alone quietly in a room." "Study to be quiet", was the admonition of the busy missionary St. Paul, to the Thessalonians. And the Psalmist knew what he was talking about when he said, "Be still, and know that I am God." Only in the silence can we hear the waves that break upon the eternal shore.

Now, what if you were to experiment a bit with this next week? What if you came to the sanctuary 15 minutes earlier than usual? Greet your friends. Have some fellowship. But take 5 minutes to sit in silence before the service and in the silence tell God that you have come to worship him and glorify him. Tell him that you are waiting in expectation to see Christ and to be transfigured more into his likeness.

The second condition for worship that is transfiguring is *beauty*. Peter, James and John were struck by the beauty of the transfigured Christ. "His clothes became radiant, exceedingly white, such that no fuller on earth could have made them so white." It was a beautiful experience. Beauty can be for us a gateway to heaven. The Psalmist says, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness". The Bible talks about the beauty of the Lord. "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord." Or again, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty God shined." "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us." "Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary."

That's why we worship in specially designed buildings which are quite different from a concert hall or a club house. Ecclesiastical architecture, diffused light, stained glass, beautiful and awe-inspiring music, the beauty and the dignity of a well ordered liturgy, all combine to make us open to the things of the Spirit. All these things lead us into the secret place of the Most High. Here in worship, more than anywhere else, we may glimpse the realities and the beauty of heaven.

Let me give you just one example from my own experience. I grew up in churches, for the most part, that had no worship services. We had

preaching services and evangelistic services but we did not have worship services. As I look back those religious services reminded me more than anything like religious entertainment and pep rallies. The worship leader was like a master of ceremonies who introduced the next act on the program. My heart longed for something more, but I didn't know what it was. I know now that I longed for the beauty of the Lord in worship.

When I went away to college I looked around at several churches before coming one Sunday to a (Methodist) church. There I discovered what my heart had longed for. The service of worship was beautiful and God centered. The liturgy and every part of the service was meant to lead the congregation up to God and to heaven. In the churches of my childhood we sang about our feelings, but in this worship service we sang about God and my feelings were stirred as never before. Like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration I didn't want to leave that sanctuary that morning. I had met God. I had seen Christ. The windows of heaven were opened and I have never been the same since. That, my friends, is what I long to have happen to you in our service of worship this morning and every time we meet.

Christ takes us by the hand this morning and invites us to climb with him up the mountain of transfiguration. Worship takes effort. It takes energy to climb a mountain. It takes time and energy to focus on God. That is why worship is called service. It is something strenuous that we do. We do not just come and sit passively. (Reformed) worship is meant to involve the congregation in prayers, responsive readings, praise, and we are to listen, not passively, but actively, to the word of Christ. "This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!" God says to us. And as we climb that mountain with others and with Christ, we find ourselves breathing the

atmosphere of heaven. And in the presence of the glorified Christ we are brought into communion, not only with God, but the whole company of the redeemed in heaven as well as on earth. Not only Moses and Elijah but our own loved ones who have passed beyond the veil are with us on this holy mount. "Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory."

And then we go back down the mountain. Down to our every ^{day} tasks (our businesses, our work, our homes.) The battle begins again with sin and Satan. But...

"When the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph-song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia. Amen."

Let us pray: O God, who on the holy mount revealed to chosen witnesses your well-beloved Son, wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening: Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may by faith behold the King in his beauty; who with you, O Father, and you, O Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.