

IT'S A MYSTERY

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 2, 2003
Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week I spoke about friends. We heard the story of how four people brought a paralyzed friend to Jesus. This morning I want to follow up on the theme of friends. Think of your *very* best friends; people you'd tell a secret too without fear of having it blabbed all over town; friends who know things about you nobody else knows and still love you. You trust them. You love them. Your heart would break to lose one of them. You probably don't ^{have} many friends like that. Most likely your most intimate friends number only two or three.

Jesus had three such intimate friends – Peter, James and John. On several occasions, Jesus chose Peter, James and John to experience events from which the other disciples were excluded. For example, one time Jesus invited Peter, James and John to go with him into a room where Jairus's little girl lay dead. Jesus told everybody else to leave except for the girl's parents and Peter, James and John. Jesus took the lifeless hand of the little girl and said, "Little girl, get up." And the little girl arose from the dead.

Another time, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him into the Garden of Gethsemane. When the four of them were all alone Jesus shared his most intimate feelings with them. "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." Moments later they were shocked to see him throw himself on the ground and pray.

I wonder if the other apostles resented Peter, James and John or got jealous because they weren't His favorites. Did they ever wonder, "Why doesn't Jesus ever choose me for some special experience?" And I wonder if Peter, James and John every let their special relationship with Jesus go to their heads. Maybe part of the reason Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus was because he was jealous of the special attention Jesus gave to Peter, James and John.

This morning the Gospel of Mark told us that "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves." The wind whined eerily over the rocks and they felt the temperature dropping as they approached the summit. Vegetation became sparse and then entirely disappeared when they reached the bare rocky summit. In the rarefied atmosphere they looked up in the darkness and saw the stars sparkle brighter than they'd ever seen before. Then something mysterious happened. "Jesus was

transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.”

The word Mark uses for *transfigured* is μετα-μορ-φω-θη. The word sounds like the English word *metamorphosis* meaning *transformation*. Geologists use the word *metamorphosis* to describe rocks that have been transformed by heat and pressure into an entirely new form. For example, when ordinary coal comes under intense pressure and heat the coal is transformed into diamond. I remember a Superman TV program years ago where Superman squeezed a chunk of coal in his hand into it turned into a diamond. He accomplished in a minute what it would take nature millions of years to accomplish. Biologists use the word *metamorphosis* to describe what happens to a caterpillar when it turns into a butterfly. A butterfly is a caterpillar that has been *transfigured* or *metamorphosed*. Some people see an ugly caterpillar and squash it. Others see a caterpillar, as it will be - a beautiful butterfly. When Peter, James and John saw Jesus transfigured they saw him, as he would be after he passed through the heat and pressure of his death and resurrection. The transfiguration answered the question, “Who is Jesus?”

For the last five weeks we’ve been following Jesus through the Gospel of Mark. One question keeps coming up, “Who is Jesus?” Is Jesus a caterpillar, to be squashed, or a beautiful butterfly? Is he a piece of coal to be burned, or a beautiful diamond? When Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic, the scribes asked, “Who is this? Who is able to forgive sins but God only?” When Jesus stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples asked, “Who is this whom the wind and waves obey?” Ironically, however, the demons recognized Jesus. One cried out, “I know who you are. The holy one of God who has come to destroy us.” Another cried, “We know who you are Jesus, the son of the most high God.”

Six days before the Transfiguration Peter recognized Jesus for the first time as the Messiah. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who are people saying I am?” “Some say John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the other Old Testament prophets.” “But who do you say I am?” Jesus asked. Silence! Then Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah.” Jesus then told his disciples that he, the Messiah, must undergo the intense heat and pressure of suffering, rejection and crucifixion. Shortly after Peter’s confession, Peter, James and John saw Jesus *transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white*. Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah.

Moses had been dead for over a thousand years and Elijah, for over 700 years but there they were – talking with Jesus. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Listen! Listen when he says he must undergo great suffering, be rejected and killed, and rise again. Then *suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.*

I once had an experienced like Peter, James and John. Several years ago I spent a week at an Eastern Orthodox monastery near the summit of a mountain north of Albany, New York. *I saw Jesus transfigured.* I got up an hour before dawn and walked up the mountainside to the unlit church. Inside, my eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness and my hearing became more acute. I heard the soft swishing of dark robed monks processing silently into the sanctuary but could barely see their silhouettes. They took their seats along the walls of the sanctuary facing one another. Someone entered with a lit candle representing the risen Christ. The monk went around the sanctuary lighting with the Christ candle other candles illuminating icons, paintings, of the saints. I saw Elijah, Moses and other saints gathered to worship with us. Finally a monk placed the large Christ candle before a magnificent icon of the Risen Christ. “His clothes became dazzling white.” The light of Christ became so bright, so overpowering, that I could no longer see the saints with their little lights – but only Christ, God’s Beloved Son. And from the darkness, I heard the cantor intone the word of God, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

Christians worship God in many ways. Some worship in ornate candlelit Byzantine sanctuaries. Others worship in dingy inner city storefronts with bare electric light bulbs dangling from wires. Some worship Jesus with guitars singing blue-grass gospel songs. Others worship with pipe organs and trained choirs. However we worship, unless we see Christ, crucified and risen, and listen to him – our worship will be in vain. It may be an aesthetic experience or entertaining but it won’t be Christian worship. Wherever and however Christians worship, we see Jesus, the suffering servant of God, risen from the dead and Lord of all. And we hear God’s Word address us, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

*O God, in the transfiguration of your Son you confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the witness of Moses and Elijah; and in the voice from the cloud you foreshadowed our adoption as your children. Make us, with Christ, heirs of your glory, and bring us to enjoy its fullness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.*