

February 11th, 2024

Mark 9:2-9 “Exposed”

For the last few weeks, we’ve been talking about the early days of Jesus’ ministry and how it seemed like he wanted to keep his identity secret. Every time he performs a miracle or heals someone of an illness or sets someone free from an unclean spirit he says, “Don’t tell anyone about this.” It’s frustrating for his disciples because it’s obvious to them he’s the messiah, but he keeps telling them to stay quiet about his identity, especially to the religious leaders. Last week we entertained the notion that if he didn’t keep his identity secret, he’d be overwhelmed with people wanting to be healed. In fact, we discovered that he couldn’t even take a break to practice good self-care without his disciples hunting him down and pestering him about how many people needed healing. This week, we’re going to jump ahead to chapter 9 which seems a little jarring since it took us three weeks just to get through part of chapter 1. The event that Gary read today is most often referred to as “The Transfiguration.” It’s a significant milestone in Jesus’ ministry, and in the life of the church. It’s a story that the lectionary gives us every year on the Sunday before Lent. Bible scholars call this a “transitional story” because from this point on, Jesus’ ministry starts shifting toward Jerusalem where he will eventually be tried and crucified.

Last week, we read about Jesus trying to get away from the crowds to have some quiet time, but then his disciples, led by Simon Peter of course, hunted him down and brought him back to the crowds. Thanks a lot guys. Later on in chapter 6, Jesus tried to get his disciples to take some time off with him, but things didn’t work out the way he’d hoped. The disciples were just getting back from a difficult solo mission and Jesus saw how tired they were. Mark writes, “He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” Jesus’ plan was to take them on a boat ride to a deserted place so they could eat and rest. But the crowds were so desperate, they followed the boat along the shore. Then Mark writes, “As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd;

and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” Once again, the retreat was thwarted, but once again Jesus had compassion for the crowds.

In today’s lesson, Jesus took his three closest disciples to a “high mountain.” Now this is going to sound awful, but that’s the absolute best place to go to get away from sick people, right? Because who’s going to follow them? If you’re sick or injured, you’re not going to be able to climb a mountain. And I get it. Every now and then, *I’ve* got to get away to a “high mountain.” I usually go somewhere up around Quincy or Buck’s Lake or Lassen National Park because those places aren’t too far away. A few times I’ve traveled down to Death Valley or to Lava Beds National Monument up in Modoc County. Terrie Thomas didn’t understand why I’d go to these places alone. She’d say, “How do you do this? How are you able to go out camping all by yourself?” I’d say, “Easy. I load my truck up with camping gear and point it thataway.” No crowds. No disciples. Just me and God. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea, but it’s what works for me as an introvert. That being said, there is value in taking a group of people on a retreat. Jesus knew this and that’s why he took his disciples to this mountain.

There’s a reason that camps, conferences, and outdoor ministry have been so consistently successful in churches. How many folks here have ever been to a summer church camp? If there were 50 Disciples clergy in this room today, the percentage of people who went to church camp would be significantly higher. And of those clergy who went to church camp, there would be a substantial number who would say that’s where they received their call to ministry. I’ve been going to church camps since 1983. I made my first confession of faith at Clydehurst Christian Ranch which is 5,351 feet above sea level. I returned there for the next two summers. For two years during college, I represented Northwest Christian College for about 10 camps per summer. With the exception of two camps that were on the Oregon coast, most were somewhere in the mountains. My favorite was at the base of a mountain outside Sisters,

Oregon called Three Fingered Jack, which was 7,844 feet above sea level. For nine years as Associate Regional Minister for the Disciple churches in Virginia, I managed Craig Springs Camp and Retreat Center elevation 2,250 at the base of Potts Mountain, at 3,820 feet. The Community of the Great Commission, our church camp here in the Northern California region sits on Michigan Bluff which is about 4,000 feet above sea level. Do you see a pattern here? Funny how most of the camps in our denomination are built on higher elevations. That's because we recognize the value and purpose of mountains as they relate to our faith and well-being.

In the Bible, Moses received the ten commandments on Jebel Musa, also known as Mt. Sinai (7,500 feet). Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1,700 feet). The prophet Deborah, the only woman who served as one of Israel's 12 judges led her troops to free the Israelites from the Canaanites on Mount Tabor (1,900 feet). Mount Tabor is also the traditional site of this morning's scripture. It's sometimes referred to as the "Mount of Transfiguration." Amazing things happen on mountains. That's why we often refer to holy moments and revelatory religious events as "mountaintop experiences."

Peter, James and John were with Jesus on the day they went to Mount Tabor. While they were there, Jesus' clothes became "glistening, intensely white as no fuller on earth could bleach them." Then Moses, the giver of God's Law and the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt appeared along with Israel's greatest prophet, Elijah. They were talking with Jesus when Peter said, "Wow! This is awesome!" Okay, he said, "Master, it is well that we are here," but he had to have been excited, right? He was so moved by this holy moment that he wanted to build three shelters – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. I like how Mark wrote that Peter said this because he didn't know what to say. You've got to love Peter. He doesn't always know what to say, but you can count on him to say something anyway. This whole Lenten season is going to be about Jesus' ministry through Peter's eyes. We're going to have some fun with this. But I understand how Peter might've thought,

“You know, down there in the valleys there are so many sick, needy people following us around. They won’t leave us alone! It’s like you have to map out an escape plan to get away from them! Jesus, we’re sorry we used to hunt you down when you were just trying to get away. But I’ve got to tell you, if this is what you were looking for when you tried to get away from the crowds, I’m all in. Let’s just stay here!”

That’s what kids who go to church camp often say at the end of the week. “Let’s just stay here!” They believe it’s so much better on the mountain than it is in the valley. For a week they get to make new friends, have fun, get away from parents. Sometimes even get away from church. They learn new songs, learn to take time to reflect and pray, explore the stories and teachings of our faith. It’s great. At the end of the week, they’re not ready to go home. The director and the counselors are, but not the campers. In the same way Jesus told Peter that they couldn’t stay on the mountain because there were people who needed them in the valley, we have to tell the campers the same thing. The mountain serves a purpose. It gives us a place to go so we can recharge our batteries and be ready for what awaits us in the valley.

We used to sing a song on the last night of camp at Craig Springs called “The Mountain” by Stephen Curtis Chapman. It’s based on the transfiguration story. Chapman writes -

I want to build a house up on this mountain
Way up high where the peaceful waters flow
To quench my thirsty soul up on the mountain
I can see for miles up on this mountain
Troubles seem so small they almost disappear
Lord I love it here up on the mountain

My faith is strengthened by all that I see
You make it easy for me to believe up on the mountain
I would love to live up on this mountain
And keep the pain of living life so far away

But I know I can't stay, up on the mountain.

I said I'd go Lord wherever you lead
For where you are is where I most want to be
And I can tell we're headed for the valley
My faith is strengthened by all that I've seen
So Lord help me remember what you've shown me
Up on the mountain

You bring me up here on the mountain
For me to rest and learn and grow
I see the truth up on the mountain
And I carry it to the world far below
So as I go down to the valley
Knowing that you will go with me
This is my prayer Lord help me to remember what you showed me
Up on the mountain.”

I like how Mark and some of the other gospel writers wanted to emphasize Jesus' reluctance to be so public about his ministry. The healings weren't meant to show off or prove that he was the Messiah. They were to meet very specific human needs. I believe he took his disciples to the mountain so they could bear witness to his divine nature. The same words that God spoke to Jesus at his baptism were spoken there on that mountain. God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" It's interesting that even as they were returning to the crowds below, Mark writes, "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." Wait Jesus, what? "Risen from the dead?" See, this was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. From this point forward, Jesus would make his way toward Jerusalem where his ministry would become much more public -- to the point where the religious leaders and governing authorities would see him as a threat and collaborate to silence him. The focus of his ministry would shift from healing to teaching. He would challenge the rulers of this world and

prepare his disciples to become ambassadors of God's kingdom so that they could carry on his ministry long after he was gone. He would be exposed. He would no longer be able to keep his ministry a secret. But the disciples needed that mountain top experience to prepare them for this last third of Jesus' ministry. They needed to know that they would receive the same divine support and be able to tap into the same source of power that Jesus was able to tap into on that mountain.

In the same way that today's scripture is a turning point for Jesus' ministry, it's also a turning point for us as we enter Lenten season. Starting Wednesday, we will all be on our way to Jerusalem with the one who is called "the Son" and "the Beloved One." This is where we get to see what we're made of. Lent is a season of intentional focus where we explore our relationship with God through Christ. Like the disciples of Jesus' time, may we who are his disciples today remember the lesson of the mountain as we travel back into the valley.