

## ***Transforming Light***

Mark 9:1-9

February 19, 2012

### **I.**

Today is transfiguration Sunday, a holy day in the church. And because of the weather it also is the day of our Diamondhead Mardi Gras parade, which seems to be a holy day of a different kind. And I'm not criticizing the parade. If it had been held yesterday as scheduled, Susan and I would have been in it.

But perhaps there is a larger purpose at work. The parade and our worship service offer a contrast, don't they?

We watch the parade and see elaborately decorated flatbed trailers and golf carts that have been transformed into symbols of worldly excess. They're here and gone. And then we listen to our Gospel reading about Jesus' transfiguration on a mountaintop, and we hear a teaching for all eternity. It's with us always.

And it's all about priorities. God wants us to be happy, so has given us things like Mardi Gras season, football season, and hunting season. But God also wants us to be holy, and so he calls us to worship and prayer. And we know the second comes first in our lives.

Today's Gospel is one of the most significant stories in the New Testament. It also is reported the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. And it actually is a combination of two stories.

The first verse recounts Jesus' words six days earlier when he told the disciples some of them would live to see the coming of God's kingdom in power. Skeptics have suggested this meant that people alive at the time would witness his second coming. This then leads them to question the Bible because the disciples are long dead, but the second coming still is in the future.

But the next eight verses explain what Jesus actually meant. He was referring to what he knew was going to happen on the mountaintop rather than describing the end of the age.

Consider how it unfolded. As Jesus had said, some, but not all, of the disciples were there. Moses and Elijah, whose earthly lives ended centuries earlier, were there as heavenly beings. God spoke to those disciples and said, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" And this was in real time, not a dream or vision. If they had recording equipment they could have captured it.

And in addition to these other circumstances, the transformation of Jesus' appearance would resolve any doubts. That's because except for this single occurrence people only saw Jesus' human nature. In terms of physical appearance he basically looked like most everybody else.

But that all changed on the mountain, and Jesus' divine nature became evident. He no longer was of this world, but of the heavenly realms. The human Jesus was revealed as the godly Jesus, and the disciples saw the preview of God's kingdom that Jesus foretold six days earlier.

But it was a preview. The feature length version has not yet been released, which will not occur until Jesus comes again in the full glory we only glimpsed today. There are, however, some things this reading calls us to understand now in advance of that momentous day.

### **II.**

Let's start with the setting. Have you noticed how mountains are places for important events in the Bible? Big things happened on mountains. Those events often marked turning points in the history of our faith.

Moses received the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai. Old Testament prophets spoke with God on mountains. A resurrected Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples on a mountain.

When the Bible tells stories about someone going up a mountain, get ready. Something is about to happen; a new revelation is in the works. You just know that God is going to do something or change something in a big way.

But those things that happened on the mountains were not the ends of the stories; they were the beginnings. None of those people went up the mountain to stay. They went up, encountered God, and came back down, transformed in some way or another.

That's because even though God's glory was on the mountain, God's work is in the world. People went up the mountain for revelation, and came down the mountain to do God's will.

The same is true for us. Just as Jesus and the disciples walked up a real mountain to hear from God, we climb a spiritual mountain on our knees, in prayer and reflection.

And as Jesus and the disciples came back down the mountain to live out God's plan for his people, we get up off our knees and go into the community to bring God's love and his Word to people who do not know them, or have placed them on the back burner.

### **III.**

And perhaps that is an example for us as we stand on the threshold of Lent. Ash Wednesday is only three days away. What can we learn from today's Gospel that might help us in the time ahead as we prepare to observe a holy Lent?

The answer, as we heard, came from the cloud. We are called to listen to Jesus, just as God told the disciples to do the same.

But that can be easier said than done. How many times have we talked to our own children only to notice they seemed distracted. And so we sternly said, "Are you listening to me?" Don't we imagine that God must look down at us, his children, and ask the same thing?

Many of us are thinking about our Lenten disciplines. I would like to suggest that seriously listening to Jesus might be a good plan, and I will mention something more specific in a moment.

But I don't recommend undertaking to listen to Jesus and not being serious about it. Sometimes we do something for Lent, and define our commitment in a way that leaves some wiggle room. Sometimes there is a catch in what we say we are going to do.

I have told the story about a fellow who moved to a new town in Ireland. Each day he visited the local pub and ordered three pints of good Irish ale. After a few weeks the bartender asked if there was any significance to this daily ritual.

The man explained that he had two brothers who had moved away; one to England and one to the United States. Before they left all three made a pact that each day they would visit a pub wherever they were, and order three pints to remember each other.

Well, one day the fellow came in and ordered only two pints, and this went on for a few days. Thinking the worst, the bartender asked if anything had happened with his brothers. The Irishman said his brothers were fine, and the bartender asked why he only ordered two pints.

The fellow smiled, and replied, "I'm still having pints for my two brothers, but as for myself I've given up drinking for Lent."

That would not be a good way to approach a commitment to listen to Jesus, would it? We should not allow ourselves any escape hatches. If we really want to hear Jesus, then our commitment to it must be with all of our heart and all of our mind.

#### **IV.**

And now, I'm going to be a bit more specific about how we might do that. A typical Lenten discipline is to give up something. In fact, our Ash Wednesday liturgy will speak of self-denial. And for those of you planning to give up something during Lent, my prayers are with you.

But self-denial also includes giving up the option not to do something. Thus, it also means doing things we previously have not been doing. That also is a way of listening to Jesus.

And something Jesus said was, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Mt. 5:15-16).

Here, I once again would mention our St. Thomas Roundtable, which is preparing ideas and recommendations for us as we plan for the church's future. As our Senior Warden said in her article in this month's newsletter, "The church is coming to a crossroads. One road leads to growth and vitality, the other to decline and inactivity. We cannot just expect to stay the same."

People on the Roundtable agree with that. And so the Roundtable will give us some interesting ideas at our first Wednesday Lenten Dinner later this month. They will urge us let our light shine before others as Jesus said. We will be called to help young people know Jesus, and to meet the spiritual needs of those around us who are searching for something beyond themselves.

So for those of us still undecided about our Lenten discipline, perhaps we can commit ourselves to doing something new or different. Let us consider activities or actions that will help St. Thomas as we work to continue being a light in the community.

#### **V.**

And so today's reading gives us food for thought as we come to the altar next Wednesday and prepare for the time that follows. And it gives us guidance as we consider how we respond to the Roundtable's work.

William Blake, an eighteenth and nineteenth century English poet and painter once used two images that can describe the choices we might have. One was the image of a cistern, and the other a fountain. As we know, a cistern was used years ago to collect rainwater for later use. And so a cistern contains, but a fountain overflows.

Today's churches have both. Some churches are cisterns that operate like social clubs, as private organizations that keep everything inside for themselves. Others, however, overflow like fountains with God's love and their efforts to make the church known in the community.

I believe St. Thomas is in that second category, and I pray that during Lent we not only will practice our individual Lenten disciplines, but also that the Spirit will lead us to take Jesus' glory from the mountain and be lights to share it with those in the community. *Amen.*