

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Mark 9:2-9

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Jesus tells his disciples that the way of following him won't be easy. He tells them things like, "Take up your cross and follow me." These were hard sayings for the friends of Jesus to hear. On the one hand, it means something about their friend Jesus going to a cross. And that's not good news. And on the other hand, it means they would go to a cross. And that's not good news either. We might suspect that this moment felt like a low point in the journey with Jesus. Disciples come up against the hard realities of the way of Christ—it is the way of courage, faith, risk, and sacrifice. But that's not all it is...as they would soon discover.

From a low point to a high point, six days later, Jesus takes three of them, James, John and Peter to a high point—a high mountain. Mark says very matter-of-factly that "Jesus took them up on a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them." He goes on to describe, if not explain, what that means: "His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them." The white brightness of Jesus and his clothes was the immediately memorable vision of this event. All three synoptic gospel writers stumble over their words to describe what it must have looked like. Matthew says his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. Luke says the appearance of his face was altered and his clothing became dazzling white.

There's something about brightness and light, fire and heat that is associated with God's presence. ("Let there be light;" Moses' face; Jesus, light of the world) Perhaps these elemental forces of the world are reminders to us of the uncontrollable, the pure, the purifying presence of God. The light, fire, brightness is what happens when you are close to God. Several years ago in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, Turkey, I bought three paintings from a dealer deep in the heart of the ancient market place: Persian artistic renderings of Old Testament stories. Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, but a ram is caught in the thicket. Jonah is being spit out of the fish onto land. Noah is piloting his boat with all the animals. In Western art, saints are portrayed as having a soft little halo over their heads. Gentle. Kind. In Persian art, saints are all wearing turbans and their heads are on fire.

Which brings us back to Jesus, who on this mountain, in front of these three bewildered disciples, is lit up like a lightning bolt, which if you believe he was fully the Son of God, isn't so surprising. We would expect the divine presence to be light and fire and radiance. Perhaps it's more surprising that he wasn't always lit up—that most of the time he looked pretty regular—the walking on water and feeding five thousand notwithstanding. He looked human. The experience of the first disciples and good theology recognizes that he didn't just look human, he was human. He was fully human and fully God, they would later say. But we would expect that if you saw who he really is beneath or beyond or within the human flesh, we would see the radiant light of holiness beaming and shining. This is what the bewildered, fortunate disciples got a glimpse of. The fullness of the two natures of Christ—human and divine.

Then God's own voice to the disciples, "This is my beloved son, listen to him." Stop talking and listen. Which begs the question, why? What was this all about? Why did Jesus take these three, and only these three, to this place so they could see this happen? Were they so 'Chatty Cathy' that Jesus had to do this to get their attention and get them to be quiet for a moment? If this was the moment that Jesus was revealed for who he really is—not just a carpenter's son, not just a good teacher, not just a miracle worker, not just a human—why didn't he do it in front of huge crowds so they would believe? Why didn't he do it all the time? It's a bigger question of much of Jesus' life—why a backwoods stable in the middle of the night? Why instruct people to keep quiet about him? Why appear to only five hundred people after his resurrection? Why, if God was about the redemption of the world and desires everyone in the world to believe in Him and be in loving relationship with Him, would God have done it through one man anyway, when God has all the resources of heaven and earth at his disposal to show his power and might? Why a man? And why only be transfigured in front of a few people when he could have shown off in front of thousands? "You like that bread and fish? You didn't think we'd have enough to eat? You think that's cool? Well, watch this." Wouldn't that have solved a lot of problems?

Maybe, though, this transfiguration that Peter, James and John saw wasn't strategy, but just what happens when you are immersed in the presence of the Divine in prayer. Maybe it wasn't for the disciples' benefit. Maybe it wasn't a one-time event. All through the gospels we see Jesus retreating into the wilderness by himself to pray. Already in the early chapters of Mark, the disciples are frantically looking for him and find him finally way outside by himself praying.

Could it be that what the disciples saw happening to Jesus was what happened to Jesus when he prayed? Could it be that Jesus' relationship with the Father was so profoundly personal and powerful that what was only observed once by human eyes is actually what happens from a life of intense prayer?

If this be the case, then the transfiguration is not only a demonstration of the divinity of Christ on display, but even more, because of the humanity of Christ, also an invitation to all of us to deeper prayer than we have ever imagined. It means it could happen to us.

John's Gospel says that Jesus, "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Matthew's Gospel says, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house."

When you pray, do you light up like a lightning bolt? Does your face shine? Do you glow? Do you glow with the light of Christ? If this kind of experience is possible through a life of devotion and prayer, I don't know about yours, but it seems a long way off in my life. And yet, I was working out in a Gold's Gym back in Virginia, and a man was nearby talking with some of his friends. And he said to me, "Are you a preacher?" I said, yes, figuring he'd seen me on our worship broadcast on the local access channel or seen me around town. You get that from time to time. He turned to his friends and said, "I knew it." "Did you see me on TV?" I asked. "No, I've never laid eyes on you in my life; I can just tell." Well, immediately I figured it must be my fried chicken gut or flabby weak biceps that gave me away as a preacher. But he went on,

“I can just tell. My wife’s a deacon in my church, I’ve been a Christian for a long time, and I can just tell someone who’s a preacher. I can pick them out.”

It got me thinking and I realized that I can often guess, walking into a crowded coffee shop, gym, or store, who’s a Christian. It has nothing to do with what they are drinking or wearing or reading. You can just sort of tell. There’s a glow. There’s a peace. There’s something about people who are in Christ that’s different. It’s not exactly like, but not unrelated to, the glow that women often have when they are pregnant. I had a little bit older church member when I was younger once say, “Women are never more beautiful than when they are pregnant.” At the time I was like, “Riiight.” But now, I agree. I see what he meant. Pregnant women are beautiful. Scientists may say it’s chemicals or hormones or blood flow, and that’s fine; but there’s a glow to a woman who has life within her that just radiates. She’s beautiful. True for people who have the life of Christ within them. Maybe not quite like Jesus on the mount or Moses coming from the mountain, but you just glow.

I think this must be the physiological expression of the spiritual journey towards *theosis*, the full indwelling of holiness in you and through you. The Fathers talked about life in Christ leading toward God being more and more in us and of us, as we grow closer to Him. And they talked about it in surprising ways. Athanasius said that it is “becoming by grace what God is by nature.” He also said, “As God became man, so man might become God.” He wasn’t the only one. Iraneaus wrote, “The word of God, our Lord Jesus, through his transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”

I don’t know of any of the Fathers who felt like they ever arrived at the place where they were so holy that they left their humanity. But then there’s this account from *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*: “Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: ‘Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: now what more should I do?’ The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: ‘Why not be totally changed into fire?’”

It seems absurd to think about—I have a hard time just being a good person, not to mention being holy, to say nothing about any sort of journey to becoming like or as God. My prayer life is less like my head is on blazing fire and more like I’m rubbing two little sticks together. But I believe the transfiguration, while unique to Jesus, was a gift to the disciples so they could see that there’s more to the way of Jesus than they might have thought. Maybe we won’t ever be transfigured—but the way of Christ is nothing less than total transformation. So may God take your mind and think through it, may God take your words and speak through them, may God take your hands and serve the world. May God take your heart and set it on fire.