

Mark 9:2-9 ‘One Graceful Gentle Movement’ Rev. John Hogue

Mt. Tabor, a free-standing peak about five miles southeast of Nazareth that rises 1843 feet above the Mediterranean Sea. In the gospel story, however, Jesus is about to commence his march to Jerusalem to nonviolently face down the Powers, and so ascends the mount in order to draw strength from his ancestors.

Here Jesus is “transfigured” (from the Greek word *metemorphōthē*, Mk 9:2) in the presence of his ancestors. On one hand, the mountaintop experiences of both Moses and Jesus cause them to “glow”—symbolizing a profound connection to God.

The great wilderness prophets, from John the Baptist to John Muir to Jim Corbett, have attested to the transformative power of nature. Most of us have some experience, however partial, of feeling cleansed and renewed by time spent hiking or camping in the wild. Hiking offers a very different energy than that generated by urban life. Yet the Bible, the Desert Mothers and Fathers, and countless poets all attest to the wilderness as the primal space of spiritual renewal.

Remember Moses? He is liberated from Pharaoh’s Egypt and embraced by God on Sinai; Recall Elijah? who flees the royal threats of Ahab and Jazebel to Horeb, taking refuge and gaining strength to continue God’s freedom struggle. And Jesus goes to the misty Source to gather himself for the difficult journey to Jerusalem to face the Powers.

The prophetic wilderness experience of transcendence is not for purposes of escaping the world, but rather fuels the struggle for true justice. The Mountain stands as a spiritual testimony and as geopolitical counterpoint to Roman empire—that the disciples are instructed to “pay attention”. While there on the mountain, Jesus starts to radiate God. Then a cloud envelopes them, and a voice from the cloud says, “This is my beloved one. Listen to him.” Not your average hike!

Transfiguration Sunday invites us to affirm the sacred mountain as connecting us to the divine. Even our own Mt. Washington called Agiocochook, a Native American word loosely translating to “Home of the Great Spirit.” If God mysteriously inhabits such wild places, then our relentless technological destruction of them—notably the current

practice of “mountain top removal” mining—is idolatrous. You see, I grew up southwest PA and it is the land of coal miners. Before I left that area, my awareness of mountaintop removal mining continues to have terrible effects on the environment and people of Appalachia. It seeks justice for it is a form of coal mining known as mountaintop removal which produces coal sludge toxic waste which is stored in a dam on the mountain and leaches into the groundwater, which poisons the environment, which defaces the top of the mountain, and which is not stopped due to political corruption.

Going back to our transfiguration, **What if the story of the transfiguration of Jesus is meant to transfigure us?** That is, what if Jesus radiating Divine Loving Essence is intended to spark the same radiance within each of us? Or do we spend too much time trying to tell others of our aches and pains and being self-absorbed in petty discussions?

Scientists investigate all kinds of things that the rest of us rarely think about until we experience it personally. Like pain, for instance.

Pain is relative. Some people can go through major surgery and come out with minimal after-effects; others find the same experience utterly debilitating.

Nevertheless, our human minds keep trying to quantify the unquantifiable. “How much does it hurt?” “the medical profession ask and seeks to “Rank it on a scale of one to ten,” “with one being like getting a thorn in your thumb, and ten being the worst pain you’ve ever known.”

A few people have built their careers around finding ways to measure pain.

For example, an American chemist, Wilbur Scoville, developed a scale to measure how hot chili peppers can get. Doing this illustration because it seems to be a fascination among young people, including my sons. In India, it seems, has a pepper called Naga

Jolokia, or **Ghost pepper**  which is about 200 times hotter than a

jalapeno pepper, and about ten times hotter than a habanero. My mouth hurts thinking about it.

I found myself interested in the “pain index” developed by an entomologist, Dr. Justin Q. Schmidt, for different kinds of insect stings. His imaginative analogies would do credit to a wine writer:

- * 1.0  **Sweat bee:** Light. A tiny spark has singed a single hair on your arm.
- * 1.2  **Fire ant:** Sharp, sudden, mildly alarming. Like walking across a shag carpet & reaching for the light switch.
- * 1.8  **Bullhorn acacia ant:** A piercing, elevated sort of pain. Someone has fired a staple into your cheek.
- * 2.0  **Bald-faced hornet:** Rich, hearty punch . Similar to getting your hand mashed in a revolving door.
- * 2.0  **Yellow jacket wasp:** Hot, almost irreverent. Imagine W.C. Fields extinguishing a cigar on your tongue.
- * 2.4  **Honey bee:** Like a match head that flips off and burns on your skin.
- * 3.0  **Harvester ant:** Bold and unrelenting. Somebody using a drill to excavate your ingrown toenail.
- * 3.0  **Paper wasp:** burning. Like spilling hydrochloric acid on a paper cut.



* 4.0 **Pepsis wasp**: Blinding, fierce, shockingly electric. A running hair drier has been dropped into your bubble bath.



* 4.0+ **Bullet ant**: Pure, intense, brilliant pain. Like walking over flaming charcoal with a 3-inch nail in your heel.

There, now, doesn't that make you feel better about your own relatively minor aches and pains?

Remember talking about humans being self-absorbed?

Four ladies were having coffee. The first woman tells her friends, "My son is a priest.

When he walks into a room, everyone calls him "Father."

The second woman chirps, "My son is a bishop. Whenever he walks into a room, people call him, "Your Grace."

The third mother says, "My son is a cardinal. Whenever he walks into a room, people say, "Your Eminence."

Since the fourth woman sips her coffee in silence, the first three women give her this subtle, "Well?"

So she replies, "My son is a gorgeous, 6' 2", full of muscle-. When he walks into a room, people say, "Oh my God!"

Seriously though, **The ultimate point of our text is not that we worship Jesus but rather that we become more like Jesus.**

And what was Jesus like? With each trial, each rejection, with each betrayal and with each hardship, he made a choice. Rather than react with vengeance or self-pity, he surrendered into a deeper place of the heart. He identified with The Essence of Life rather than just with his one individual life. Jesus did not dwell on individual pain but rather The radiance of Sacred Essence beamed brightly until not even his skin could conceal it.

We have the same choice. Will we allow ourselves to feel the pain of not getting what we want without getting stuck in the muck of disappointment? Will we identify less and less

and be self-absorbed ? Will we respond to shortcomings in ourselves and others with ever-expanding understanding, truth-telling and compassion? Will we respond to challenges from an Inner Light that shines on every thought, word and action, yet is beyond them all?

If so, we will be transfigured. We will become more Christ-like, and the line will start to blur between where God ends and we begin.

The way Mark frames this mountain top event looks very similar to the exodus of Israel out of Egypt, passing through the wilderness to the promised land after their liberation from slavery. Jesus is positioned on the mountain top much like Moses when he met with God and received the commandments; Moses' face, too, was transfigured by that encounter. To complete this portrayal, a voice comes from the cloud, calling upon the disciples to listen to him. Jesus did not get carried away with the glory but gets down to the reality of life in all its messiness. Jesus was preparing for his difficult journey towards Jerusalem. Jesus makes known the inevitable journey to the cross. This journey is Jesus' exodus moment. He states: "The son of man has to endure great sufferings and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised on the third day" (Mark 8:31).

Peter pulls him aside and rebukes Jesus that "such things will never happen to him!" Only to be reprimanded by Jesus for his actions. Jesus resists. Peter, even in his bewildered state wants to capture the moment in a special sacred place and bottle it by pitching a tent. Peter on the mountain wants to get busy with his own agenda because he didn't like the agenda Jesus had in mind. Jesus was very clear about his journey to Jerusalem, to the heart of religious and political power in defiance, to challenge and subvert them. The disciples are caught up in the cloud, enchanted by this vision.

But at that very moment, when it would seem that Jesus is emphasizing the mystical and transcendent dimension, Jesus himself takes the disciples away from visions, away from the mountain top, to meet the ones who needed them most in the valley. Jesus takes them to the man whose son was possessed by a demon. Jesus himself leads them down to the bottom of that mountain, to the valleys, to the hurting people, unbelieving officials, the ineffective religious institutions and the demons below.

In this reading of the Gospel, we cannot ignore the gulf between Galilee, where Jesus had most of his ministry and where he is heading to, Jerusalem, where the colonial power of Rome was on display. The political forces were disfiguring humanity of the colonized by taking their dignity away, sadly some religious elements were complicit in that process. Significantly, the mountain top experience becomes the bridge between these two worlds. **Jesus imagined the relationship with God and people should not be defined by fear but by love. Jesus offered love as an alternative to the violence unleashed by religious and political power.**

The context of Jesus' journey was not a comforting one, neither to his disciples then, nor to us now. Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy and political apathy. **He recognized that injustice and inequalities had become a norm under the empire.** Jesus faced his opposition as he descended the mountain. On the back of this glorious vision, Jesus charged his disciples to go into the hostile society, living under Roman imperialism. When Jesus says that he is sending them like sheep among wolves, the disciples knew the danger involved. Jesus implicates the councils, governors, kings and the religious authorities in this prejudiced social order. **Jesus knew that his view would inevitably put him on a collision course with the earthly powers. Jesus offered an alternative, a resistance movement, the politics of love, rooted in justice and truth.**

Jesus embodied the politics of love by bringing health to the sick, raising the dead, touching the untouchables, proclaiming freedom to the slaves and kicking out the oppressive demons. **Jesus was not promising his disciples security and well-being but disorder and disruption to the status-quo.** Because the good news of love they are carrying directly challenges the powers and authorities who ruled their society. Peter, James and John needed the mountain top experience of transfiguration to face the challenging days ahead and perhaps Jesus did too- the glory they saw, the heavenly voice, the command to listen to him, all this would sustain them along the road to Jerusalem, the way of the cross. The reason Jesus takes the journey to Jerusalem **through the valley is critical because he doesn't intend to grab power through an armed revolution; rather, he wanted to transform human relationships and build a new order**

from the grass roots. The politics of love built on pursuit of justice and truth in every sphere of life.

Jesus proclaimed God's nonviolent love. It is not a cop out in the midst of evil power, especially its desire to delegitimize justice and truth. Non-violent love is not to rationalize passive suffering as spiritual and political virtue. Rather it is an invitation to demonstrate love that resists evil and does good. The way of the cross cannot be privatized as an individual spiritual journey. The cross becomes a dynamic public pursuit of fraternity, liberty and justice rooted in love. The cross and subsequent resurrection has overcome the world's power game of domination, exploitation, greed and deception.

Love without justice is empty. The politics of love is rooted in justice, righteousness and mercy as proclaimed by the prophets. It rattles the status-quo, flies in the face of councils, governors, kings, imperial powers, presidents, prime ministers and high priests who control the lives and trample upon hopes of people. The Gospel proclaimed by Jesus calls Christians to name the evils in our society, confront injustice, proclaim the good news of justice and live the alternative social order in the shape of Jesus movement.

Transfiguration is an affirmation of an alternative way of loving and redeeming the world. Peter becomes a model for us. We want to domesticate and institutionalize God's power shown through Jesus. The church is a good model for power grab and idolatry by basking in Jesus' glory and divine power. That was not the intention of transfiguration; the intention was to take the journey on the way of the cross, downwards to the valleys of death so that people might have life. The purpose of Jesus taking his disciples up the mountain is to give them a reason to believe and go into the word and bear witness to this transformative path of love, non-violent love that brings redemption and life.

The charge from Jesus to his disciples of present day is to accept our flawed humanity, where prejudice, discrimination and bigotry abounds. The church, both individually and institutionally, charged to expose the inequities that we know exists. The church must examine our theologies that inform and sustain such inequities and offer radical alternatives for a new social order in the light of the Gospel. The church must protect

common good by resisting political manipulations, not simply patch-up old structures of injustices that benefit our self-interest.

Jesus charged his disciples to take the good news of change to the hostile world, not continuing business as usual but insisting on fundamental change that is going to put everyone at odds at each other. The church can no longer confine the revolutionary spirit of Jesus and remain a captive of a hostile social political order. **We need to be transfigured and transformed. Christians are called not to be defined by narrow ethnic, racial and familial connection but draw from their identity in Christ. This means Christians must rise above self-interest and self-preservation that privileges “us” against “them.” Christians are called to go beyond our immediate identities and not to be blindsided by our self-interest.**

When we experience God’s profound presence, we might be tempted to stay in that “bubble” like Peter. The trouble is that as long as we continue to do that, we will not be able to reach the place of freedom. The foretaste of glory on the top of the mountain is to encourage us to **go down** and follow Jesus through his exodus of death and resurrection; that’s how our suffering and that of the world will be transfigured and redeemed. **Transfiguration is not something that could be bottled and preserved, but it ignites and sustains further action.** But the truth is, the world, which is eagerly seeking Christ, gets to meet only the perplexed and failure of disciples! **Disciples who are caught up in their own struggle to make sense of their calling, to tackle the challenges and pain caused by human limitations and their lack of faith.**

Transfiguration is an invitation to reframe our perspectives through redeeming human dignity. Transfiguration means to be challenged and governed by a different set of norms, in opposition to this world and the powers that disfigure the image of God in each one of us. Theologically, transfiguration is the heavenly vision that transforms and revolutionizes our present reality.

This twin experience of the glory of transfiguration, and despair of disciples, challenges us to reconsider our call to be faithful, our call to believe and our call to deliver, our call to **reach out to the world that is crying for help, hope and love.** The same voice that directed the disciples directs us today as we stand on the verge of this journey into the

season of Lent, into suffering, to the cross, for which this transfiguration is intended to prepare Jesus, the disciples, and us. We need to connect the mountain top to the valleys of our ordinary life. **We need not despair**, as in the prophetic words of Amanda Gorman,

For there is always light,

If only we're brave enough to see it.

If only we're brave enough to be it.

Amanda Gorman