

Metamorphosis

Mark 9:2-9

A few weeks ago, we read through Mark 8 and observed that what the disciples failed to see is that Jesus is ultimately directing them toward their own crosses. Jesus is preparing them for his mission. And through that challenge Mark challenges us to engage in the same relationship with Jesus that will transform our lives as he leads us to our own crosses so that he can prepare us for his mission in the 21st century.

Now we move from this scene to the transfiguration story.

The transfiguration story is one of those stories that tend to be a bit underrated. I say underrated because it's a rather bizarre story. This story awkwardly interrupts Jesus' trek to Jerusalem. In fact, it's down right confusing for some scholars who try to explain away or tame it. Oh but this story is much too wild to be tamed or simply explained away.

Let me explain. In Chapters 1-8, Mark expresses many of the stories with a sense of NOW! Things tend to happen "immediately," "right away," or "at once." The crowds grow, the name of Jesus is becoming a household name, feelings get a little hurt and egos begin to clash. Mark reminds me of one of my professors in Church History. We had eight weeks to look at the first 1500 years of Church History. Let me put it to you this way, we didn't stop much to smell the roses. Mark is on the go, and if you blink, you'll miss a lot! I found myself in this Church History class wanting to know a lot more than what we had time for and I didn't risk blinking much. Honestly I feel the same way here in Mark. In each story we find ourselves wanting more details than Mark offers us. We want to know why Peter and John left their nets and what happened to their family business. We want to know why Jesus told those he healed to keep silent about what he was doing. Inquiring minds want to know more! But Mark gives less. But not today. Not in this bizarre story.

I know this is only my opinion, but if Mark were to keep a story short, this would have been the one. Short and sweet would have worked well here. But today, Mark has us on a field trip. We get to step off the bus and walk around and we get to stop and smell the roses. Yet it's awkward to be left here. It's tempting to just run through this story and get to the next one. I believe though that Mark wants us to look a little closer.

At first blush, what we see seems plain enough. For example, I like the way the story starts (v.2): "**Six days later.**" I know what it's like to wait six days. Six days later we got the results from the lab." "Six days later the UPS package was found between the screen door and the main door." Six days later is a pretty good way to start a story. Yet, up until this point, Mark has had little concern about time. Mark seems to be far more concerned about the right moment or more accurately the right time in which God acts, rather than the chronology of an event. Mark says "six days later" -- But six days later than when?

Mark continues (v.2): **Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone.**

Hmm... Why take Peter and not Matthew? Why take John and not Andrew? Why does Jesus leave the other disciples down at the foot of the mountain? Were not these guys as committed as Peter, James and John? Didn't these guys also leave everything to follow Jesus? BTW- what mountain did

they climb? Sinai? Why stop here for a camping trip when it looks like Jesus can't get to Jerusalem fast enough?

Here we are at the very beginning of this story and it looks like Mark gives details that make no sense. It also appears that Mark withholds details that would really make sense to include.

Then out of nowhere, Mark moves the story from black and white to full color. It's like hearing Dorothy say to Toto, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." The NIV translates vv. 2 & 3 **There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.**

Fascinating move Mark! This word "transfigured" really comes from the same word we get "metamorphosis" from. Mark tells us this in a passive voice. In other words Mark wants us to know that Jesus is not playing tricks to somehow dazzle these three guys. Jesus is not playing with magic. Instead Mark is showing us that whatever happened **six days later**, on an unnamed mountain happens by the hand of God. The Jesus that Peter, James and John knew before the mountain, and the Jesus they follow down the mountain, is by God's hand, unmistakably changed (transfigured).

But we're not done with this bizarre story. Now we see two old dead guys show up (Elijah and Moses). In an instant, Mark shows us the religious history from the 10 Commandments to the prophetic tradition of the promised Messiah. On top of this nameless mountain we get to see this grand line-up of the top figures mentioned in Scripture. Wow! Whada-ya-say? Well... evidently Peter has something to say--are you surprised? v. 5 **it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters -- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."**

Now--this brings me back to where we left off a few weeks ago in this series of lessons. You remember in chapter 8 where Jesus delivered this dreary sermon about his own suffering, tragedy and death. It's when Jesus shows the mess of a suffering Messiah. And it's messy enough that-- Peter will not stand for it! Peter (who also represents the disciples) rebukes Jesus because what Jesus has to say is way-to-stinking-messy. But Peter and the disciples miss the point. The messiness of his death is the inevitable result of a life ordered by God toward the goal of bringing all people under the one reign (rule), the Kingdom of God.

The sermon in chapter 8 is a tough sermon for Peter and the disciples to hear. However, on top of this mountain you can almost hear Peter say... This is more like it! Give me mountaintop highs over the sufferings of living in the valley below any day.

I'm with Peter! It would be great to be on this mountain with God's top guys, cooking some stew over a campfire and chatting--rather than having to deal with the pain and suffering of living in the valley below.

- Who wants to go in the valley below where we're never sure if our children are safe?
- Who wants to go in the valley below where people, God's people fight about stuff that when it's all said and done won't even matter?
- Who wants to go in the valley below and wait for CTScans, and bury our loved ones?
- Who wants to go in the valley below where we pay big bucks to expose ourselves to needless violence and sickening human behavior?

I'm with Peter on this one! I like the metamorphosed Jesus--whiter than white!

But before Peter can act on his words, the story continues. If you don't look carefully it's easy to miss. Mark repeats a scene he shared with us at the beginning of his gospel. It's when Jesus is baptized. Now we hear that voice again says: **v. 7b** "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

During this response the disciples notice that Elijah and Moses have disappeared as quickly as they appeared. I think Mark wants us to know that you and I won't find God by looking back or by staying put.

Some people look for God by looking back to the days when everybody knew everybody in church. Back to when the songs were easier and anthems always made your heart to sing. Some people look back to the days when children were allowed to pray in public school and where families sat around the dinner table for meaningful conversation and devotion.

Some people are not nearly as nostalgic. Some people are content with the way things are right now. Like Peter, they try to hold on to those moments of peace and serenity. Why try something new in worship when what we do now works well--for me. Why talk about or preach about matters that don't really apply to me or speak to me?

Why? Because you don't find God by looking back or staying put-- that's why!

It's interesting to note that when Peter, James and John walk down the mountain with Jesus, Jesus makes it clear that he doesn't want them "to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead." (v.9)

It seems that everyone wants a dazzling, whiter than white Jesus who is like a lucky charm.

Mark stops the bus long enough for us to get off in order to see the metamorphosed Jesus. To "ooh" and "aah" at those who meet with him on the mountaintop, and to hear the words **v. 7b** "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

And just when we start to be impressed with all we've seen in this most bizarre story, Mark shows us the same old Jesus coming down the mountain as he continues his trek to Jerusalem and climbs a cross. It will not be long before we see some of his followers going to the tomb to find his remains--
Mark 16:1-8

But don't forget, we don't find Jesus by looking back or staying put.

I wish I could tell you this morning specifically where the Spirit is leading this congregation, but I can't. What I can tell you though is that I'm confident that the Spirit will lead us someplace other than where we are now--and someplace--other than we have ever been.

I anticipate that there will be moments where it will be cozy and we'll experience that mountaintop quality of seeing clearly the hand of God move among us.

- But I suspect that most of our time will involve crowded moments when there is more to do than time to do it.
- I suspect that there will be those times when you decide to reach out into this world and show the gospel of Jesus--that others will look at you as we might look at a Cyclops!
- I suspect that there will be times that we'll look beyond the borders of our own self-interests and refuse to let stand the most comfortable lies we sometimes hold on to.

When we follow the metamorphosed, crucified and risen Jesus we are deciding to live a life that will not longer turn back, but instead will live the surrendered life. This surrendered life may involve crowded, struggling, and truthful moments for us--but take heart--it will always involve loving moments.

I like the story that Gary Charles tells about the story that renegade preacher and writer Will Campbell shares about an old wise woman from his hometown in Mississippi. Campbell writes, "Miss Velma Westbury used to say, 'If you just love the folks what's easy to love, that really ain't no love at all.' She said, 'If you love one, you have to love 'em all.' Now if you think about it, that's the radical message of Easter and the glad tidings of Christmas." Oh... Campbell did add one other thing-- "Of course, some folks said Miss Velma was crazy."

You know... some folks say Mark was crazy to include this little story about the transfiguration in his gospel.

- A story that encourages us to hope beyond the darkness of death.
- A story in which we somehow find the courage, or more accurately are given the courage to go down the mountain and to the valley below where life is tough, and crosses are waiting, and where God's love does not rule in every heart.

Maybe Mark was crazy to suggest that God's love and grace was enough for Jesus, and was enough for Peter, James and John, and is enough for us who live on the other side of this most bizarre story of the transfiguration.

Let us pray...

The Transfiguration

2After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. 3His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters -- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." 6(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

7Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

8Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Scot Poirier
Minister

Chelmsford Church of Christ
205 North St.
Chelmsford Ma.
978-256-8901