

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.14.2021



## Listen To The Vision

**The Reverend Anna Dickson**

Mark 9: 2-9

And now let us turn our attention to the gospel reading, from Mark, chapter 9, verses 2-9. Listen with me for the Word of the Lord:

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 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.”

Here ends our reading. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.



One of the formative experiences of my summers growing up was attending a small camp for girls in the mountains of North Carolina for a few weeks in mid-July. Every morning of those two week sessions, just after breakfast, all of us would wander from the mess hall over a small grassy hill into an old stone chapel. It echoed with our chatter and our giggles, and the secret handshakes of newly formed friendships, and every morning as we walked in we were greeted with the loud, and often just-slightly-out-of-tune and definitely out-of-rhythm strumming of the girls in the Guitar Skill, who would lead us in a few energetic opening songs. If you've ever been to Montreat, go ahead and strike that image from your mind. This was a much, much smaller scale, and much, much less professional operation. And I loved it for that reason. I don't know how they teach the lyrics there nowadays, but when I was a camper, the seat of honor was next to the overhead projector -you might remember the kind in the 90s that used to heat up to just about 2000 degrees - where for a day, you could be in charge of picking the songs and changing out the translucent lyrics sheets projected onto the back wall.

Every morning, after announcements and silly skits, when the 20 minute service was over, we'd all file out the front door to what I now understand was a sending song - a song intended to put a devotional thought in your mind for the day ahead. And I can still picture the lyrics of one of my favorite sending songs,



projected up on the back wall in scribbled Sharpie. I won't sing them for you this morning, but here they are:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in his wonderful face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim.

In the light of his glory and grace.

It was like an inhale, and then an exhale, a centering prayer as we walked into the day ahead.

It's been a very long time since I've been in that echoey little chapel, but as I've grown older, and life has grown more complex, that song has come back to me when I have least expected it to crop up. An inhale. Then an exhale. A steadying prayer when I have needed a refocus, the ability to see beyond, to take what a friend of mine used to call "an eternal perspective" as opposed to one pushed and impoverished and made reactionary by the chronic anxiety of our age. To bring what is really real, and what is really important, and what is really true back into view.

That is what our story from the gospel of Mark is about today, too. It is a moment when three disciples - Peter, and James, and John, are re-focused on what is really



real. But with apologies to those of you who might share my affection, or at least my nostalgia for the old camp song, I have discovered that it doesn't quite get it right when it comes to following Jesus. Because it doesn't quite match up with the experience of lived discipleship. One of the privileges of being in ministry is witnessing the ways others live in response to Jesus' glory and grace in their own lives, and over the years, I have noticed that those who have the courage to turn their eyes upon him, to look, to really look into his face, often find that the opposite is true when it comes to the way it affects their view of the world. What I mean is that the things of earth do not, as the song suggests, tend to grow strangely dim in light of Christ. Yes, perhaps superficial or overblown, self-centered concerns are relativized by such a focus, but it is precisely by the light of his glory, by virtue of his grace, that Jesus' disciples tend to discover, that what is really real, and what is really important, and what is really true about our world doesn't fade away, but comes back into view because of him.

The Jesus we meet on the mountaintop is glorious to be sure. Here in Mark chapter 9, Jesus appears "lit up like the Vegas strip" and he's having this celestial conversation with two heavyweights of the tradition, with Moses representing the law and Elijah, the prophets. It's a dazzling scene, and perhaps, in that moment of overwhelm and awe, the things of earth did grow strangely dim for Peter and James and John, and bless Peter's heart, he does what too many of us tend to do when we don't know what to say: he starts talking. How much pain in the world



would be circumvented if we could kick that habit, but nonetheless, he makes a pious-enough sounding suggestion in view of the vision: let's just stay here. Let's make this permanent. This, right here, is what is really real. This, right here, is the glory we've imagined all along.

And who can blame him? It's a pain-free, beautiful vision that completely eclipses the passion predictions on either side of it in the gospel - those moments when Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and die. We, like Peter, might prefer this Jesus bathed in glory, this fleeting glimpse of otherworldly beauty to lift us out of this one for a moment, something to admire that doesn't demand much of us in return. The church through the centuries has always been tempted to prefer the glorious Son of God, robed in light to the suffering Son of Man on his way to the Cross - and this story seems to give us such a vision. Peter stands in for all of us in this scene who desire a spirituality of celestial awe, a moment of escape from the concerns of the world. But the hard truth is that a spirituality that is dependent only on such "mountaintop experiences" is insufficient to sustain us in those seasons of life that are not lived on the mountaintop. Our spirits crave not divine spectacle, but the assurance of divine presence, a sense of divine call - and while a robust Christian faith can and should include the celebration of moments when the transcendent breaks through, disciples of Jesus in every age have been surprised to discover that this tends to happen in ways that are more intimate and ordinary than we'd ever have imagined.



The poet Christian Wiman recounts a time when this happened for him. Telling about a time in his life when he struggled to pray, he writes,

One day when I had gone to a little chapel near my office at lunchtime and was once more praying while wondering how and why and to whom I prayed, a man came in and eased into the pew directly across the aisle from me. As we were the only two people there, his choice of where to sit seemed odd—and irritating. Within a couple of minutes all thought of God was gone into the man's constant movements and his elaborate sighs, and when I finally rose in exasperation he stood immediately to face me. He had the sandblasted look of long poverty, the skeletal clarity of long addiction, and that vaguely aggressive abasement that truly tests the nature of one's charity. Very cunning, I noted, failing the test even as I opened my wallet: to stake out this little chapel, to prey upon the praying! For days it nagged at me—not him, but it, the situation—which, I finally realized, was precisely the problem: how easily a fatal complacency seeps into even those acts we undertake as disciplines, and how comfortable we become with our own intellectual and spiritual discomfort. Wondering how and why and to whom I prayed? I felt almost as if God had been telling me, as if Christ were telling me (in church no less!), get off your mystified [behind] and do something.



Wiman had a moment of seeing beyond. To what was really real, and what was really important, and what was really true. A moment of discovering that a faith that really endures, a faith that possesses the power really to change things, doesn't sit back and wait to be dazzled, but commits to live, one day at a time, in the presence of the One who is still present with us when the moments that dazzle us are over, or seem very hard to remember indeed, or when our life of faith isn't quite as shiny or as exciting as we'd like it to be. And he was surprised, perhaps, to discover, that the transcendent came to him in the form of a renewed call to discipleship.

That's what happens on the mountaintop for Peter and James and John. The real miracle is not so much that Jesus is transfigured before them, but comes at the end of the story, in the quiet aftermath of the spectacle, when the disciples have their vision changed in such a way that they are able to hear their calling in the world anew. The real miracle is that the world itself is transfigured by Christ's presence in it, and it doesn't seem to matter, that in the preceding moment, in full view of such undeniable glory the three disciples miss the point, and speak instead of listen and scurry around anxiously trying to bottle up what experience of that glory they can capture. God still issues the invitation to discipleship again, in familiar and unadorned language: This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him. And "Suddenly," Mark tells us, "when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."



And it must have felt to them like an inhale, and then an exhale, a centering prayer as they prepared to walk with him into what lay before them on the road to Jerusalem.

In the novel *Gilead*, an older Presbyterian minister, the Reverend John Ames, writes a series of letters to his young son as he nears the end of his own life, in which he attempts to capture for his young son some of the wisdom he knows he won't be around to share with him. In one of the letters, he writes this:

“It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance - for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light....Wherever you turn your eyes, the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only who could have the courage to see?”

What Jesus seems to need in his disciples are not people sitting on their mystified laurels, but people of changed vision, who have the courage to see the world transfigured by Christ's presence in it, even when it appears to have sunk back into itself, and seems but an ash heap, and who are trying to follow him in it...because they have discovered that Christ's glory is not something that separates him from us. It's something he chooses to reveal in his suffering and in



his sharing of ours in this world. The disciple of Christ is willing to search for him here, and to follow him where he's promised to be found.

“Christ plays in ten thousand places,” writes the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins,  
“Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his,  
To the Father, through the features of men's faces.”

Here's the thing about following Jesus. When you look full into his wonderful face, the things of earth become really real, because you see him there, too. The more you gaze upon him, the less you'll be able to look away from the pain that crops up in this world that he died to redeem. The more you get to know him, the more your heart will break for the things that break his heart in the world. The more seriously you take him, the less you'll look for him on the mountaintop, and the more you'll see him in the face of brothers and sisters who, like you, have stomachs that get empty, and bodies that get tired, and hearts that need encouraging, and spirits that need tending. You might even begin to discover that his glory really is revealed, strangely, precisely in those moments in your life that are anything but dazzling, because you can sense that he is present to you in your suffering, that he enters it with you.

He will greet you in places you'd never expect to find him. He will wrest you from your comfortable spirituality, and move you beyond the fatal complacency of your



intellectual and spiritual discomfort into a life of greater risk and higher reward. And if you're listening, he'll speak in the voices of those you'd never expect to bring you a transcendent word.

And suddenly, it will be as if the Lord has breathed on the cold ember of the world once more, and brought it - and you - to life. And you will know that the glory of God truly is, as Irenaeus once famously put it, visible in human beings who have come fully alive - not in some far away, celestial scene, not only on the mountaintop, but in every place, in every terrain, in every circumstance, in every time.

And you just might discover that, in those hard and holy moments in your life when you do not know what to say, if you can stop speaking for just one minute, and really look, and really listen, the things of earth are illumined by his glory and his grace, and you will never be able to see them in the same way again.

To God be the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

