

SERMON – The Transfiguration

11 February 2018 – Margaret Mitchell

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our salvation.

What an informative and meaningful sermon Barb Liotskos gave us last Sunday... she alluded to the Gospel of Mark as a Netflix series, and encapsulated the Gospel up to and including last Sunday's reading from Chapter 1 of Mark... and left us hanging as to what would happen in the next episode...

Well, here we are today, and have fast forwarded to Chapter 9! So let me bring you up to date with what has been left untold so far. Chapters 2 and 3 of Mark continue with Jesus' healing and casting out demons,

In Chapter 3, Jesus goes up a mountain, where he appoints the twelve apostles, amongst whom are Simon (who is known as Peter), James and his brother John. Jesus begins teaching in parables, which continue throughout Chapter 4. At the close of this chapter Mark the Gospeller says this: With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them (meaning the crowds who followed him) as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

The disciples were with Jesus continually, observing his healings, listening to his parables, experiencing Jesus' many miracles... some of which involved themselves, such as Jesus calming the waves and the storm when they were all in the boat together; they witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, and the feeding of the four thousand, Jesus himself sent them out in two's giving them authority to cast out demons;

All this time they were with him, they didn't really see Jesus, didn't really get him, or understand his purpose, what he was all about. And so we come to Chapter 9 and today's reading... how Peter, James and John had an experience on the top of a mountain, where their eyes were opened to the glory of God in Christ.

Have you ever been at a worship service, an ordinary Sunday morning Eucharist, when the spirit moves within you? It may be the words of a

hymn, or the lifting of the bread and wine... but in a moment you find your whole being at peace and at one with God?

Have you ever been caught up in a piece of music which pierces your heart with it's melody, the chords and notes transporting you to a different plane.... you want the music to go on, and on and never stop.

Have you ever watched a sunrise, or a sunset, or a starry night sky, and been struck with the awe and wonder of it ... you stand there transfixed.... transported somehow to a different realm, it engulfs your whole body, mind and spirit... in a moment, it changes, and life as we know it, begins again... back to normal.

Have you ever been to a place you've been to many times, when in an extraordinary moment you see it in a way you've never seen it before? It's always been like that, but on this occasion you see it differently and you wonder why.

These and other moments like them in our lives, are moments when we seem to be connected to the Divine, a brief glimpse into the mind and heart of God, our eyes are opened, and **we** are opened to the light of God within us. We want to stay in that divine space, to capture it somehow, but all too soon the moment is gone. That infinitesimal moment in time has passed, but the experience lives on in our heart, and although we may try to recapture the feeling again, we cannot. Yet, we are somehow changed by the experience... we have been transfigured.

Transfiguration means a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state. And I believe we have all had such moments.

In today's Gospel, Mark tells us Jesus and three of his apostles, Peter, James and go to a mountain to pray. On the mountain, Jesus begins to shine with bright rays of light. Then the prophets Moses and Elijah appear next to him and he speaks with them. It says that Peter, James and John are terrified – they are in awe of what they are experiencing. Peter wants to build three houses there on the mountain, for Jesus, Elijah and Moses... he wants to keep the moment going, to stay there permanently in that holy and awesome presence.

Suddenly a voice from heaven is heard saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him!” - the moment passes, Elijah and Moses are gone, and it’s just them again, Jesus and Peter and James and John, alone on the mountain... back to the ordinariness of their lives.

Theologian Helmut Thielicke says of this passage that he did not think anything happened to Jesus on the mountain. Whatever happened, it was within and to the disciples. He maintains that Jesus continued throughout this episode to be what he always was, the incarnation of God in human flesh, but for that fleeting moment the eyes of the disciples were opened to the unimaginable glory of the incarnation.

Thielicke is not in anyway lessening the mystery and the truth of the transfiguration, but puts a different view on it for us and our experiences as we try to relate to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master.

Herbert O’Driscoll writes that Jesus is always the incarnation of God in human flesh. For most of the time we are blinded to the glory of this truth we believe. We worship Christ, we pray to him, we give thanks to him. Yet for the most part we take this glory for granted. Our lives get busy, our spirituality has limitations. But every now and then when the blindness is lifted, and, like the three disciples we encounter our Lord transfigured, it is not Jesus who has changed, but in some mysterious way, we have been changed, at least for a fleeting moment.

Just as the disciples said: Rabbi, it is good for us to be here, let us build three houses... so do we want to remain in the light of his presence, in that moment of divine connection.

God’s words “this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him” are not just words spoken on that mountain, to those disciples.. but to each of us, here, in this moment... telling us to remember who Jesus Christ really is in our lives, and to stop taking him for granted.

There is a connection with our Gospel reading to today’s Hebrew Scripture passage from Second Kings – Elijah’s ascension to heaven...

Three times in this passage Elisha refuses to stay behind when Elijah tells him to stay put...Elisha’s loyalty to his master Elijah is apparent; he is steadfast in his willingness to go on the journey with Elijah, no matter where Elijah was going.

We see in this scripture passage the transfiguration of Elijah as he is swept in a whirlwind up to heaven, but we also see the transfiguration of Elisha, who in that moment saw things in a new way.

He hadn't thought he was ready to be a prophet, he was immature and dependant on Elijah, but in that moment Elisha was able to face Elijah's death, and discovered within himself the courage and wisdom he longed for, the double share of Elijah's spirit... to go on with his life following God's call as a prophet to God's people.

And isn't that what transfiguration means to all of us in our lives? That moment when we realise something inside us has changed, we can face the adversities we encounter, we feel the connection to the divine light within us, giving us the courage to go on.

At the morning Eucharist here in the chapel on Wednesday, in place of a sermon, we sat in a circle and discussed the readings.

Bishop Barbara shared with us how she thought of the Gospel reading, the mountain top experience, when she made a journey to Merritt last week.

She was concerned, fearful if you will, of the rapidly changing winter road conditions on the Coquihalla... down here in the valley of Kamloops, the roads were okay, it was a little mucky and slushy, but familiar territory. As she continued the journey the road conditions were becoming quite poor. She told us if she had been driving on her own, she probably would have turned round and headed back to Kamloops. But she had a companion driving with her, and as they progressed up the Coquihalla mountain, the sky cleared to a lovely blue, the sun was shining, and the radiance of the hills with the sun shining on the snow, was really beautiful, and she was glad she had continued the journey.

Another member of the group commented that often when we have a mountain top experience, rather than simply coming back down to real life and sharing the experience with others - like Peter, we want to stay there, and in our humanness say "Let's do this again!" maybe that's how some of our church traditions are born!

We all encounter times on our life's journey where we fear the risk of change, of doing something different.. of "climbing the mountain." It's so much safer in the valley bottom.. even here in the midst of the mud and

muck of life, we get comfortable, we become accustomed to what we know. We don't want to risk change, it's scary... it takes too much courage, too much energy to go up the mountain, to make the climb. But when we do, it is so worth the effort... we too are transfigured, changed by the experience.

United church minister Richard Fairchild in one of his sermons put it simply ...that sometimes we have to climb a mountain to have a mountain top experience - to know in our hearts and our minds that God is doing something - right now - right here - before our eyes - and in our ears.

Sometimes we have to climb a mountain so we can see things in a different way, from a little different perspective... sometimes we have to climb a mountain to bring things into focus.

The mountain top experiences are not something for every day - we are called to live and work in the valleys - where real life continues, to be with those people who need us - and whom we need. But we all do need some encouragement - some strengthening - some experience of the Holy - some experience of the power of God if we are to grow and strengthen our faith. We are called to see as well as to believe. We are called to experience - as well as to hope. We are called to know - as well as to have faith. And there is nothing like the mountaintops to bring all these things into focus.

Sometimes we need to climb a mountain to have a mountain top experience - as did Jesus and Peter and James and John - who struggled up that long slope in the hot sun one day to end up experiencing what they experienced - as do we who exercise the discipline of coming to church each and every week - so we may not only worship God and learn more about God and support each other with our presence - but so we might also experience some special moments of the Holy and be transfigured in some way within our selves..

We all struggle to stay steadfast and loyal to Jesus in the messiness of life, but despite our struggles, we like Peter James and John have to figure out what God is saying to us in any situation... when God says to us: "this is My Beloved Son, listen to Him."

And the best part is this: we don't have to journey alone, just as Elisha had his master Elijah, just as Peter, James and John had each other, just as Paul had his companions, just as Bishop Barbara had her driver... we too have companions on our journey... our brothers and sisters in Christ, to hold our hand, offer words of encouragement and help us on our way. And through it all, Christ's transfiguration glory shines within us.

Like you, I have encountered mountains and deep valleys in the journey of my life.. and I hope I know and understand the importance of each. I know that for me to have the strength to continue life's journey here in the muck and mud of the valley of real life, I need to climb a mountain occasionally, to do my part, so God can reveal himself to me there, change me, transfigure me for the work he is calling me to do through Jesus Christ.

God is calling to each one of us: "This is My Beloved Son... Listen to Him." Are we listening?

Amen.