

Mark 9:2-9

9:2 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,

9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

9:5 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."

9:6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9:9 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.

Listen to Him
Bob Stillerman
Transfiguration Sunday, 2/11/2024
Mark 2:2-9



Several week ago, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, God’s voice called out, “You are my child. And I love you. And I am proud of you. And with you I am well pleased.” God was speaking directly to Jesus, offering Jesus an affirmation of God’s calling.

Today, on Transfiguration Sunday, God’s voice calls out again: “This is my child, my Beloved, listen to him.” God’s not talking to Jesus. God’s talking about Jesus. God is offering instructions. God’s talking to Peter, and John, and James, and to you and me as well.

Think about that. Peter, and John, and James, and you and me, too, stand in the most mind-blowing of circumstances, in the company of humanity’s greatest leader, Moses, and Israel’s greatest prophet, Elijah, in the cloud of God’s presence, on the peak of a breathtaking mountain...and NONE of these things are the headline.

A Nazorean peasant stands before us, dazzling in a Tide-white robe, and God’s says, “Listen to him.”

In other words, in Jesus, we find God among us. Here is One who heals with touch; who loves with words and deeds; who transforms lives with meaningful conversations; who humbles himself in service; who sees into the souls of people, not just the pretty and popular ones, but the discarded ones, too – in fact, Jesus is one of the discarded! Here is One who does not abolish the law, but fulfills it; who prophesies a truth drenched in justice and love; who helps communities realize that their commune is rooted in the divine.

Yes, throughout Mark’s gospel and the others as well, Jesus may dazzle. Jesus may rise. Jesus may ascend. Jesus may walk on water. Jesus may do three dozen things we’ll never be able to fully explain or understand.

But that's not what's important. Here's what is: ***This morning, God tells us Jesus is a source worth listening to.***

I want to home in for a few moments on how we, as Millbrook Baptist Church, can better listen to and for Jesus as an authentic source of God's work in the world.

This is my tenth sermon on a Transfiguration Sunday. And if I am honest with you, I always wonder what to do with this text!!!

On first appearance (pardon my pun), the Transfiguration is a disjointed and strange event. It has a supernatural component. Sure, people have moments of sincere clarity that we describe as being illumined, but they rarely, if ever, I'm pretty sure never, become physically illumined like a fluorescent light bulb. The event is shrouded in secrecy. Jesus urges the disciples to tell no one of what they've seen.

There are appearances of Moses and Elijah, giving off *Return of the Jedi* vibes. Peter, the fisherman of the group, suddenly decides he's a carpenter or an Eagle Scout, or both, and is ready to build substantial dwellings for the esteemed guests. God's theophany thunders with earthquake. And characters are *terrified* – somebody's always gotta be terrified in these stories.

This is a wonderful story. A strange story. A weird story. A memorable story. A story that has more meaning and complexity than I could ever dream of summarizing in a single sermon, let alone a year-long thesis.

So...I stepped back from the text. And I decided to think about the word *transfigure*. And you know what? *Transfigure* a cool verb!!! When someone transfigures, they don't lose or alter their inner substance.

Rather, their appearance changes in a way that exalts their spiritual presence. They were always profound. Now, through this new appearance, it's just much easier to find or to see their profoundness.

In the Exodus stories, Moses transfigured in his encounters with God's presence. Each time Moses went up the mountain to speak to God, he'd come back with a dazzling, Tide-white aura for a few days. Mark's story elevates Jesus to the level of connectedness Moses shared with God. Just as Moses was transfigured to establish God's law for Israel, so too, Jesus will be transfigured to fulfil God's law for all of humanity, and indeed, the whole of God's creation.

But I don't think it's just Moses and Jesus that experience transfiguration. Yes, the pair experiences transfiguration on the grandest of scales. But their transfigurations lead to more transfiguring.

Steeped in a new covenant, the Joshua generation leaves Mt. Sinai, crosses the Jordan River, and inherits a new land with new possibilities. Emboldened by Easter hope, and buoyed by the winds of Pentecost, the earliest Jesus-followers will establish the Acts Church. And even Elisha, whom we heard from in our other reading, will receive a double portion of God's blessing.

These aren't the stories of supernatural humans made up of supernatural substances. These are the stories of women and men, made of the same substance as you and me, whose faith and connectedness has transfigured into transcendence and transformation. They live out kingdom moments of motionless movement, full presence, God-stuff.

The more I read today's text, the more I believe transfiguration isn't so strange, or unusual, or even impossible.

Instead, I believe we live in a world that confuses transfiguration with *transmutation*. Actually, doesn't confuse, but prefers, longs for, insists on transmuting.

When someone or something *transmutes*, it takes on an entirely new, usually higher and more powerful form. Sometimes that's a good thing. I think we can all agree that the world is most certainly a better place for having the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. More exciting. Safer. More nuanced and sophisticated. Definitely more tubular.

But...transmute can also take on a more negative form. Sometimes a person or object is forced or subjected to unwanted change. The inner substance does not become a more profound expression of itself, but rather it is mutated, corrupted, made grotesque and incompatible with its intended purpose.

Jesus' transfiguration is a signal to listen to him, and it's coupled with God's direct command. If we fail to recognize this truth, and fail to hear Jesus, we do something really dangerous. We don't transfigure Jesus into something more profound, we transmute into him something completely superficial and hollow.

And so I ask you, what's more outrageous? What's more audacious? What's more ludicrous?

Believing that Jesus transfigured a dazzling white, or insisting that Jesus be transmuted into an expression of whiteness?

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Shall we follow, shall we listen to the One, still glowing, who will walk down that mountain, proclaim the restoration of all things, those that Elijah foretold, heal the sick and possessed, and stare into the teeth of Rome, knowing full well the consequences? Or shall we reduce Jesus, transmute him to the docile, predicable, tamed European that sits quietly framed in an old Sunday School room, the enforcer of the very status quo he spent a lifetime seeking to disrupt?

Shall we dare to believe that in Jesus, there was One SO connected with God's presence that he could still the seas and tame the storms of our chaos, all with a ghostly appearance? Shall we hear and embrace his words, "Peace, peace I bring you, and peace I give to you." Or... is it easier to insist that Jesus transmuted green with envy and fear. Is it easier to limit Jesus to our finite expectations and often spectacular failures rather than dare he (and we!) could, can, and will live into God's unlimited possibilities?

John the Evangelist proclaimed that Jesus would transfigure us with baptism by the Holy Spirit. Is it too bold to believe in such a common denominator? Can we hear Jesus' sincere invitation to repentance, and renewal, and restoration? Can we believe thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven? Or... is it just easier to believe that Jesus was transmuted a deep blue or a deep red? For surely it's not God's headlines that are important, but rather it's the one generated by cable news. Right?

Must we reduce Jesus to an economic populist, or a constitutional preservationist, or the persona of this season's radicalized nationalism? Must we shoehorn the meaning of his ministry into a 60-second ad in tonight's game? Must we insist Jesus be anything in the world except who Jesus actually was?!?

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Jesus doesn't need us to put an Instagram filter on him. Jesus isn't a tool at our disposal to project a world that's most like us, and most beneficial for us. Rather, Jesus is a filter by which we can catch an authentic glimpse of God's world. In Jesus, we understand that humanity can have AND show a profound connection with God.

Our transfiguration, indeed, our very existence and our very survival, begins and ends with our listening to Jesus.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, I'm glad the disciples listened to Jesus. They looked past the distractions on that mountain, eventually at least, and they listened to the One who led them. And it's because of their listening, that we share a faith community, and a tradition, and table.

Jesus said, "This do in remembrance of me."

And so they did.

And so do we.

Friends, we live in a busy and distracting world. In Jesus, we find a presence that breaks through all that clutter. And in Jesus, we're invited to a table that offers rest and welcome.

I know that last Sunday was a formal Communion Sunday. But the Season of Lent begins this Wednesday, with an opportunity to share at the table on Ash Wednesday, as well as a half dozen more in the coming season. The Lententide also offers substantial opportunities for discernment and reflection, for listening to God both individually and collectively.

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Our table may not levitate, and it may not transfigure, and it may even have a leg that wobbles, but I can promise you that God's table offers us communion with a source who transforms. And I can promise you that God's table offers the presence of One worth listening to.

God said, "This is my Son, that's right he's my child. And I love him. And I'm proud of him. Jesus is my Beloved. And y'all should listen to him!"

Millbrook Baptist Church, there's no time like the present.

Amen.