

“After the Mountain”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark 9:2-9
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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I think preaching the Transfiguration story is fun. I mean, it’s so weird—the ghost-like emergence of Moses and Elijah, a glowing Jesus and a bumbling Peter—what’s not to like? The story comes up in the lectionary every year, which means I’ve preached it seven or eight times by now, and I never really tire of unraveling its mysteries. I like the challenge of the weirder stories. I always have. And I like the way the strangeness of God loosens our certainties and calls us to take a second look and third one and fourth . . .

One part of this story I tend to avoid, however, is this business about not telling anyone. It says, Jesus “ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Where’s the fun in that? Why was Jesus being stingy with the strange stuff? Why keep the magical mountaintop moment to themselves? Wasn’t this confirmation that Christ was for real? Wasn’t this proof?

You know, I’ve had my own mountaintop moments—nothing as fantastic as prophets returned from the dead or a voice from heaven or a shiny-faced Jesus—but I’ve had them. Maybe you have too. Moments of startling clarity, for example, or moments of unexpected grace. Moments where you knew something true about yourself or about God. Moments where you were inspired or awakened, filled with awe or filled with hope. Moments in which your faith mattered deeply to you or moments where you were captivated—overshadowed—by a sense of urgency to do what was right regardless of the cost. Mountaintops. These moments come to us in all sorts of ways from showy to subtle and for many of us they are rare, too rare, and later we may doubt they ever really happened.

When the mountaintop moments do happen, like Peter we might like to build some sort of tent around it, keep the experience safe and intact. But usually the experience is fleeting. Within days or minutes or seconds we are headed back down the mountain to a world in which people suffer inexplicably and grievously, a world where tyrants rule and children get cancer, where hearts break and far too often injustice prevails.

When the disciples encounter Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the mountain, it wasn’t a moment for the masses. It was a moment for them, because, frankly, they were about to need it. Once they got off that mountain, the journey with Jesus was going to get really, really tough. They would see him threatened, see him betrayed, see him arrested, see him sentenced. They would fear for his life; they would fear for their own. They would stare defeat right in the face. What would they have to hold onto in those moments of shock and terror?

Preacher and scholar Karoline Lewis says Post-Transfiguration is not for the faint of heart. Once the disciples descended from the mountain, they found themselves in the valley of the shadow of the death. And really, those brief mountaintop moments were hardly enough—not enough for the

disciples, not enough for us. Once we're back in the valley, we scarcely even remember the mountain. When we do remember, if we don't brush it off as some fanciful figment of our imagination, we long for it ferociously, wonder why we can't have it back. Where is God's voice now when we need it most and the world is going to pot? Why is it so hard to hold on to the experience of transcendence?

I think the point of the Transfiguration moment wasn't to give the disciples something to hold to for when times got hard. The point was to change them in some irrevocable way such that even at their most despairing, they could never go back to the time before they knew Jesus in this way.

I remember distinctly the most significant spiritual awakening of my life that happened over the course of a private retreat. I had a little red journal I carried with me, recording everything of importance, and on the day I was to board the plane to return back home, I felt a bit of panic knowing these gift-days were ending and real life was about to crash back in. Would I lose it all? All I had learned? All the self-discovery, the renewal, the awakening, the magic? Would I forget all about it? But the line that fell out of me onto the journal page was this: "I'm scared to go back . . . but I've left footprints all over my inner self. I've blazed a new trail." I had this sense that something irreversible had happened.

Through the years I have found that to be true. I have faced some really low lows since that time. I have doubted everything and lost my hope. I've been exhausted, overcome by sorrow and stuck in despair. And yet, at the same time, I have never regressed to the girl I was before that awakening. It's like you can't unknow what you know or unsee what you've seen. It leaves its mark, and to be forever changed does not mean the sailing is smooth or that you don't make mistakes or pick up your old bad habits from time to time. But even in your lowest low, you are different than you were. You may not even realize it, but the moment of transfiguration stays with you even when your conscious mind has forgotten all about it.

Maybe Jesus didn't need to order the disciples not to tell. Because things would get so hard so fast they would forget it had even happened. They'd become stuck in the horror of the present. But after the resurrection, the memories would come back. And they would realize—maybe only in hindsight—that God was with them even as they faced crucifixion.

Friends, I do not think this story is so extraordinary or different from our own story. The days have grown dark and merciless. Christ, it seems, is being sacrificed over and over. God's name is being used in vain as people claim to be Christians and in the same breath harm their brother, assault their sister. Refugees flee violence and war—men, women, children seeking asylum—and our government turns them away. We live in a day where cruelty is made into policy and in far too many pockets of our country, Christianity has become synonymous with racism and homophobia. Greed is God, and truth is whatever the man in power says it is.

Our story is not unlike the story of the disciples who feared, who worried, who grieved as the real Jesus was captured by the authorities and taken away from them, in danger of being slaughtered. Lent is not just an ancient story we tell ourselves. It's a story we are in. A reality we are in. Every day Christ's values are in danger. Every day God's children are in danger of poverty, of deportation, of harassment, of slander. Every day the cross looms close.

For us, it is not about remembering the mountaintop so much as it is about knowing that we have already been changed and come what may, we will live as those who know Christ as love. We cannot go backwards from this knowing. We may have our doubts that love will win, that good will ever resurrect, but in some ways the uncertainty of victory doesn't matter. Because even if love lost, we've already chosen a side. We've already been converted to the way of love, and even the threat of death and obliteration can't stop us from loving.

My friend Cathy once told me that even though people threaten her that she is going to hell because she's gay, it doesn't bother her because even hell, she says, can't take away her love. She'd just get down there and keep on loving. Hell can't stop her from loving.

That, my friends, is what it means to be transfigured.

As Christians we walk in the hope of resurrection, but there are days and years and seasons where it looks like death, all valley-walking and shadows. But even then we fear no evil. Because to be touched by Love is greater than hope. How do our Scriptures put it? "These three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."

The mountaintop memory might not sustain us in the way we expected and we might not be able to get back to it. But it's now in the DNA of who we have become, and there's no erasing it.

It wouldn't have done a lick of good for Jesus to say to the disciples as they came down that mountain, "Okay, now you're able to get through hell and back." No. They would have run away screaming. He just said, "Keep this moment to yourselves," and then he led the way through hell. Through hell and, spoiler alert, *back*. But *when* you're walking through the valley of the shadow of death, you don't always know there's a back. You think hell might be forever. You can't always hang on to hope. But the love you have learned hangs on to you, because it's a part of you.

To meet Love on the mountain doesn't just inspire you. It changes you so that even after the mountain, when your memories of it have faded and all hope seems lost, still, you find yourself choosing to love the oppressed ones whom God loves. You've seen the world the way God sees it, and you can't unsee.

Church of God, we have been transfigured. There is no other way but down the mountain, into the valley, taking our changed selves with us. Come what may, let us walk in the way of love. Amen.