

Transfiguration of Our Lord (B)  
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Text: Mark 9:2-9

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We have a gift today—a beautiful and powerful gift. It's a gift of perspective and clarity, perhaps even understanding or wisdom, a sense of purpose. It's a gift for people who are on a journey that is challenging, maybe even confusing or disorienting, for people whose journey takes them through grief and sadness, or uncertainty and fear, or worry and anxiety. It's a gift for people who may not be able to see what lies ahead, but still need to be moving on, making decisions, putting one foot in front of the other.

This gift was originally for Jesus' first followers, for Peter, James and John. They had seen Jesus do amazing things. He had shown them what the reign of God looks like—it looks like healing and forgiveness and love and freedom. They were convinced that Jesus was more than just a teacher, more than a miracle worker. God was present in him in a powerful way. He was the Messiah, God's own Son, the One who would bring God's reign to earth. But they were on their way, with Jesus, to Jerusalem. They didn't understand yet, but Jesus would be betrayed by one of his own and executed as a criminal. Everything they thought they knew would be called into question. They needed clarity and perspective. They needed to know who Jesus really was.

So Jesus took them up a mountain—a place of clarity and revelation. And they saw Jesus shining like the sun on top of that mountain. There would still be struggles ahead, but they had seen who Jesus really was, and they couldn't unsee it. No matter what happened in Jerusalem, even when everything that happened seemed to declare that Jesus was a fraud and following him was a dead end—they had still seen Jesus shining like the sun. They had seen him in the company of Israel's greatest leaders, Moses and Elijah. They had heard the voice of God say, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

It was such a strange and otherworldly gift. It's strange and otherworldly for us too. But today, this vision is a gift for us as well. Because we are on a journey too—and it is genuinely challenging, more than usual. There's the pandemic, with new and more contagious variants of the virus beginning to spread. There's the political violence, with lies and disinformation being spread too. We are immersed in cultural values that are antithetical to Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, of generosity and humility. We're surrounded by powerful influences that say Jesus is nothing, and following him is a dead end.

Altogether, it is genuinely confusing and disorienting. And that can be truly dangerous. I read this week about the helicopter crash last year that killed Kobe Bryant and his daughter, Gigi. Investigators believe that the pilot flew into low-lying clouds and became disoriented and lost control of the helicopter. That was what caused him to fly down into a hillside. When we become disoriented, we might think up is down, or wrong is right. We might get taken in by lies, and we might make terrible choices for us, for our community, for our world. So Jesus gives us a gift—a gift we truly need—to see him shining like the sun. To hear the voice of God say, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

There's a difference, though, between a gift being given and a gift being received—and this vision of transfiguration isn't a particularly easy gift to receive. You might be wondering...what is this? Or why don't I experience anything like this? Is this just one of those weird things in the Bible that I don't understand, and just leave me more confused and disoriented?

I have to admit that this story has given me more than a little trouble. I'm a logical kind of person, a little skeptical about anything supernatural. I'm a modern person, and am constitutionally averse to saying anything like, "Just swallow hard and believe it," or "It's in the Bible, so it has to be true." So I spent a good chunk of this past week reading everything I could in an effort to try to understand this story. I spent the better part of an afternoon reading about strange, otherworldly stories from the ancient world—about gods like Zeus or Demeter revealing themselves in human form; about Moses speaking with God in the tent of meeting, and needing to put a veil over his face when he came out, because his face was glowing; about heroes like Hercules becoming divine; about Jewish stories about Elijah being taken up to heaven, or about the glory Adam had before the fall. I brought all of my scholarship and skepticism, and here's where I ended up. This story is completely wound up in the language and imagery of a culture that is utterly foreign to us, but Mark is using the categories of his culture, rooted in the world of the first century Mediterranean, to try to give us the same gift that Jesus gave Peter, James and John—a gift of clarity and perspective and vision and understanding.

The story of the transfiguration is strange. It's entirely wrapped in mystery. But here's what I do know. When I'm not disoriented by worry, or confused by uncertainty, this story conforms exactly to what I know to be true. I know that Jesus and his way of compassion and forgiveness show me the only kind of human life I want to live. I know that Jesus and his way of generosity and humility show me the only way forward, the only way of life and blessing, for the whole human family. And so I believe Jesus is from God. Jesus embodies all that is true and sacred. Jesus embodies God's best and most beautiful desires for this beloved creation. So I receive this strange, otherworldly story as God's gift—symbolic, visionary, mystical and mysterious, wrapped in language and imagery that belong to the ancient world—but still with power to help me stay oriented, to help me remember what is true and what is not. This gift helps me recognize what is reliable and life-giving and what is not. Jesus and his way of compassion and forgiveness will lead me on the path of life and blessing, through every sort of disorienting challenge.

When a voice inside me says to just watch out for myself, to always put my convenience and my desires first—what I need is Jesus who shines like the sun. When I feel the urge to retaliate against anyone who inconveniences me, or when I imagine that some of God's children are disposable or evil, what I need is the voice of God saying, "This is my Son. Listen to him." That's the gift that keeps me from becoming completely disoriented and lost.

So I pray that you can recognize this scripture as a gift for you. And I pray that in receiving it, you can feel how it counters the disorienting, confusing forces that threaten to overwhelm us and drive us into me-first and I-don't-care-as-long-as-I-get-mine, the forces that make life small

and bitter and hopeless. I pray you can see this gift—Jesus shining like the sun—and that it helps you feel clear, and centered, that it helps you unclench, that it lets your heart open with compassion and generosity. I pray that this gift sets you free from fear and worry, from uncertainty and fear, and that the light of Jesus shining like the sun sheds light on your path forward, this day and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.