

The Transforming Ministry of Jesus

Mark 9:2–9

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As a young person growing up in the church, I was a big fan of youth group rallies. Approximately once per month one of the churches in the area would host a large gathering of youth. There would usually be a band and a loud charismatic preacher. I remember being swept up by the music and feeling very empowered by the words spoken to come home and be a different person. A sort of mountaintop experience.

Some years ago I had a conversation with an acquaintance, an avid mountain climber, who like me had grown up in the church. He eventually came to struggle with the idea of God and the story of the Bible as an authentic Script reflecting the strivings and failures of the human race in relating to God. But he knew his Bible well and decided that if God was to be found, perhaps he would be found as the ancients found him—on top of a mountain peak. And so he climbed the Swiss Alps. But God was nowhere to be found. Another sort of mountaintop experience.

What is your own mountaintop experience? What have your moments of enlightenment, your encounters with the divine been? Would you recognize God if you found him there? How have you been changed? To what have you been changed?

1. In our reading today, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Like our encounters, the story describes an experience that human words cannot express:

- The appearance of Jesus' face changed (Luke 9:29)
- His face shone like the sun (Matt 17:2)
- His clothes became dazzling white (Luke 9:29)
- His clothes became dazzling—extremely white as no launderer on earth could whiten them (Mark 9:3)
- His clothes became as white as light (Matt 17:2)

It is a story of transformation, a story in which the voice of the divine pierces into human experience and brings certain euphoria. But also a story which is no less consistent with the voices of the past and of grounded human

experience. A story that evokes human responses of fear and wonder. What on earth are we to make of it all?

2. It is a fact of this story that mountaintop experiences do not always bring us to full epiphany. This is true of the question of Jesus' mission and identity. Earlier in Mark, the crowds are speculating that Jesus is John the Baptist resuscitated, or maybe Elijah or one of the prophets. The author of the gospel agrees with Peter's statement that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29). The mountaintop experience seems to suggest that there is a little bit of both going on. *Jesus is the Messiah who stands in the great tradition of prophets.*

Jesus' mission is equally obscure. Prior to the mountain ascent, Jesus speaks of his rejection, suffering, death and resurrection as integral to his mission. Yet neither God nor Jesus ever explains *why* this must be so. Only after Jesus is crucified and raised to the disciples fully comprehend. *Mountaintop experiences do not always bring us to full epiphany.*

This is true of our own sense of mission and identity. Jesus' challenge to us is that the way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him (cf. Mark 8:34–38). But *why* must this be so? And what does it *mean*? In our moments of mountaintop experiences, in our encounters with the divine, we are left with the changing sense of our own identity and life mission. In moments of transformation we stand in fear and trembling. *What does God require of us?*

Mountaintop experiences do not always bring us to full epiphany. God's mysteries unfold, not in a dramatic instant, but over the course of a lifetime, revealed in God's way and time. It may take a lifetime to learn what God requires of us.

3. The story invites us to journey up the mountain, to free ourselves from daily distractions, so that we can pay attention to God's voice. In a culture of business this is difficult. The story challenges us to find those moments in the early morning, those half day silent retreats, those times of prayer with others in our faith community. In these moments we come to a greater sense of who God is and who we are. *We are re-focused, re-aligned.*

4a. The story, in the context of the preceding verses, invites us to take action. The transfiguration is a powerful word to *us* to take up our cross and

follow Christ. This is not a private bearing of personal woes for the sake of Jesus. Rather, it is a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world's power game of domination, exploitation, greed, and deception. It is a pursuit that may lead to rejection, suffering, and death. Perhaps this is why the disciples trembled.

4b. Mountaintop-type encounters with God require something of us. They require the transformation of self, church, and society. But we know that these things do not happen overnight. Anyone who has experienced the euphoria of a life-changing experience knows the perils of coming down the mountain. We have certain questions, certain fears. Christ has changed us, absolutely and eternally. But will people believe us? Or will they be skeptical of our ability to exhibit genuine transformation? How many of us can identify?

Or worse, will we be tempted to re-accommodate to culture? Almost seven years ago I journeyed to the mountains of Burundi. I was so impacted by the poverty that I saw and how inadequately the world seemed to be addressing it. I resolved at the very least to radically alter my own selfish and consumptive behaviour and to become an agent for change. That original zealotry has waned, very slowly over time. How many of us can identify?

5. *What kind of enlightenment will it take to wake us up unto longlasting permanent transformation? To realize the power to change that an encounter with the divine can bring? To step out as a change agent and to fearlessly embrace all the risks this might entail? To hear and see God's mysteries unfolding and forming us to "do our best" for ourselves and all of humanity?* We journey up the mountain together. Together we are re-focused, re-aligned for God's work in the world.

Amen.