

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Good to Be Here”

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Mark 9:2-9

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, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then 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.’ ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

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.

One of the scenes from the cartoon strip *Peanuts* has Charlie Brown, Linus, and Lucy lying on the grass, looking up at the sky. Lucy says, “If you use your imagination, you will see lots of things in cloud formations. What do you see, Linus?” “Well,” Linus begins, “those clouds up there look like the map of British Honduras on the Caribbean. That cloud there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group over there gives one the impression of the stoning of Stephen—there’s the apostle Paul standing on one side.” Lucy replied, “Mmm. Very good. And what do you see Charlie Brown?” Charlie pauses for a moment and then says, “Well, I was going to say I see a duckie and a horsie, but I’ve changed my mind.”

I will always remember an experience I had at one of my previous churches, Pine Hill Congregational Church in West Bloomfield. If you have ever worshipped there you will know that the pulpit stands in front of a large clear glass window, with the beautiful background of the lawn, the trees, and the sky. Following one of the services, I was confronted by a gentleman who said he had something to tell me. He seemed a little shaken, perhaps even embarrassed. I was preparing for the worst. Then he told me that during my sermon, he had seen the face of Jesus in the clouds behind the pulpit. Jesus, he claimed, was hovering directly over my shoulder during the entire sermon. Jesus, he said, was speaking directly to his heart. At first I was very skeptical. But I knew this man to be one of reason, not one easily swayed by emotions or prone to the ecstatic gifts of the Holy Spirit. So I went back into the sanctuary to look for myself. Like Charlie Brown, all I could see was perhaps a duck or a horse, or at the very best- a

butterfly. But in the following months the man stuck to his story and even developed some spiritual disciplines which reinforced his story. He truly had experienced something holy and sacred and because of it life had changed.

On this final Sunday in the season of Epiphany, we read again the story of Jesus' transfiguration. The author of Mark, in his usual brevity, gives us "just the facts." Jesus, with Peter and James and John, had walked up a high mountain, away from the crowd below. There Jesus was transfigured, that is his appearance changed. His clothes became dazzling white. Elijah and Moses, two of the central figures in the Hebrew faith, appeared with Jesus. A voice spoke from the heavens, similar to the one heard at his baptism saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" It was all very magnificent and impressive!

Peter is the one like us in this particular story. He is overcome by what he has seen and heard. He knows something important has happened. But he isn't quite sure what he is supposed to do. In a kind of confused response he shouts out, "It is good that we are here. Let's build three tents to capture the moment so we can return to it any time we want!" Peter wanted to stay right there, or at least hang on to the vision that had been revealed to him, to live the rest of his days in the power of God's wonder and glory.

We've all those moments, haven't we? We've seen glory. We have achieved clarity of purpose. We have transcended the dull and mundane nature of everyday life. We have achieved victory, meeting all our fondest desires and wishes. We all remember how good it felt when we first fell in love with someone. We all remember how good it felt to win a prize. We all remember how it felt to receive an honor or a promotion. We all remember what it was like to be on that vacation when we were able to totally get away from it all. We all remember the Magglio home run that won the American League pennant for the Tigers in 2006. I had one of those moments this past Christmas Eve. The 9:00 p.m. candlelight service was the best Christmas Eve service that I have ever been part of. Just about everything went perfectly. The music. The word. The candles. The people. It was magical. It was Christmas. It was good to be here. It is good for us when all of these things happen. It moves us. It changes us. It gives us a sense of meaning and enjoyment that encourages us in the living of the rest of life.

William Willimon writes of a man who emerged from his church's triumphant Easter service. He said to his pastor, "What a great service! If I die right now, that's okay." By this he meant that he had received some kind of vision or experience that he believed was enough to last him throughout the rest of his life.

The problem we have is that those moments don't last very long. Like Peter we would like to build a tent to capture the experience, freeze the moment, and maintain the feeling. But then we start seeing the blemishes of the one with whom we have fallen in love. The thrill of the honor or promotion diminishes with the burden of the work and the load of responsibility. We all know we have to come home from even the best of vacations. Game winning home runs are replaced by throwing errors by pitchers in a disappointing World Series. And the Sunday after Christmas Eve, well, worship just wasn't the same!

But that is true of Jesus and his disciples right after this moment of transfiguration. Today there is a moment of clarity that makes it easy to understand the

glory and power of Jesus. But despite Peter's yearning to keep everything easy and simple, Jesus and his followers must return back to the valley. Right after this time of clear revelation, there is to be more resistance, more conflict, more crisis, and the specter of the cross. While it was important for this moment of transfiguration to occur, it will mean little unless its meaning is carried out in the struggles of life that are yet to come. It was good to be here. But we cannot stay. The moment is fleeting. God moves on ahead of us. The true test of God's glory will be seen in the walk that is the way of the cross.

I remember many years ago when Laura and I took Maren, then age three, for a dream vacation to Disney World. Everything about it was perfect. It was a wonderful escape from the late October dreariness of Michigan. We went to all the parks and rode all of the rides, including about ten trips on "It's a Small World" and Dumbo! I was chosen to be part of the "Indiana Jones" stage show at MGM. We had a character breakfast and had our pictures taken with Pluto, Goofy, and Chip and Dale. When sat through the park's character shows so Maren could sing along with all the songs that she had been watching on her videos at home. I was moved to tears filming my daughter hugging her favorite Disney characters Minnie Mouse and Belle from Beauty and the Beast. It was good to be there! We flew home on Halloween day, weary yet transformed and uplifted by Disney magic, arriving back at the house just in time to take Maren out for Trick-or-Treat. Later that night as I tucked Maren into bed, I asked her which she preferred- Disney World or Halloween. Her reply without hesitation was "Halloween!" I quickly came back down from the mountain, thinking about all the money I had spent to accomplish less than a bagful of Halloween candy.

The point of this transfiguration story is one that speaks well to what we need to hold in our hearts as we prepare for Lent. The glory of the mountaintop is what we may yearn for. We would like to be on that high that finds Jesus in every puffy cloud and escape from pain in every positive and successful experience. Yes, we sometimes get to climb the mountain. And it is good to be there. But it is not what will last.

Glory is not what we get when we find temporary ways to rise above the chaos, the fear, and the tears of our real world. While it is good to be there in such enlightening and thrilling moments, God is already moving on. Glory is what we get when God pitches a tent over the everyday events of our life. Glory is received when God comes and stands beside us, works for us, teaches us, lifts us up, gives us hope, and heals us.

The season of Lent reminds us that God's glory is not something that removes all of the suffering of life nor it is something that takes us away from pain and loss. If we are to live Lent as it is intended, we must learn to see and experience God in life's troubles and fears, seeing signs of hope in the divine power of the cross that comes before resurrection. God's glory as found in Jesus' action and example is a glory that enables us to walk even in the midst of suffering, to walk with hope and confidence, knowing that God is with us away from the mountaintop, down in the valley, despite the pain.