

The Real Deal

Mark 9:2-9

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,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no one on earth could bleach them.
And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses,
who were talking with Jesus.

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.”

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

Then a cloud overshadowed them,
and from the cloud there came a voice,
“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

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

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.

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I.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before the start of the Lenten season. In Mark's account of the event, which we have this morning as our sermon text, we find Jesus leading Peter, James, and John up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And there, we are told, without fanfare or introduction, Jesus was "*Transfigured*" before them, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then the story goes on to talk about the arrival of Elijah and Moses; and, of course, the voice from the cloud echoing the same words heard at Jesus' baptism, "*This is my Son, the Beloved*" but adding a new twist, the voice also says: "*Listen to him!*"

II.

There is an awful lot going on in this text, and any number of things on which to preach. What first leaps right out at the listener, is the notion of *Transfiguration* itself. "Transfiguration" is the translation of the Greek word, "*metamorpho*"; i.e., to transform, literally or figuratively, to *metamorphose*. Transfiguration, then, is the change into another form which is, and this is important, *outwardly* visible.

Now, most times when I go to preach on a heavy duty, or even just well used, theological term or idea, I do a fair amount of research as to the more accepted or orthodox use, understanding, or interpretation. So, for instance, we know that the standard rap on the Transfiguration is that Jesus, supposedly, takes on the form of his heavenly glory, and thus establishes his identity as the Son of God, as he begins to move directly to the cross of Calvary and Easter Sunday morning. In other words, it establishes his pedigree so we can more fully understand his destiny.

III.

What I find so fascinating about the transfiguration of Jesus, is that it is wholly unique. Unlike many other events, Jesus did not announce that it would happen, the disciples certainly did not *expect* it, and such an event was

never repeated. There does not appear to be any Old Testament prophecy connected with this event. It is not tied to, or referenced in, any of the great discourses of Jesus and, perhaps even more puzzling, Jesus instructed those disciples who witnessed it to keep quiet about what they had seen. The Transfiguration, then, seems to be an enigmatic event, one that appears, at the very least, to be out of place, or, at the most, unnecessary.

IV.

However, if we consider the Transfiguration with a mindfulness about the relationship between Jesus and the disciples who accompanied him up the mountain, we begin to have a much greater clarity about the purpose of this unique event. The Gospel of Mark, especially early on, has a specific Christological focus which is somewhat more distinct and immediate than the other Gospels; that is, to portray Jesus as both a powerful miracle worker or healer, and as a *teacher*.

His greatest lessons, though, he reserved for his disciples in an effort to help them *fully* realize *who* he is and *what* he is all about. Accompanying Jesus all around Galilee the disciple witnessed his power at work and his teachings put into practice. As a result of these experiences, the disciples came to recognize Jesus for who he is: not just one prophet among many, but the very Son of God.

V.

Being the son of God is all fine and well but what, exactly, is the Son of God here to *do*? Though just a bunch of regular folks, the disciples were not dummies, they knew that all this healing and teaching must be leading somewhere (right?). Either Jesus is up to something and has a plan in mind, or all of his words and deeds would eventually gain the notice of the authorities and, sooner or later, they would force his hand.

The question in the back of all their minds was this: is Jesus *the* Messiah. The answer? Well, yes and no. Is Jesus the long anticipated and prophesied militaristic figure who would lead Israel against her enemies and reestablish a Solomonesque reign of glory, spurning a national revival and ushering in a period of unequalled prosperity? No; sorry. Jesus is, though, the Messiah none-the-less; just not the kind they were anticipating.

VI.

What the story of the Transfiguration does, is set the stage for a *new* messianic understanding; one which will be crucial in the years to come to the church as of yet unborn. Though he has no political or military power, Jesus nonetheless speaks with authority; the authority of God: “*Listen to him.*” And, in contrast to the relative obscurity and ordinariness in which they currently languished, the disciples also received that day a foretaste of the glory and victory of Jesus that was to come; all dazzling and white.

Finally, the Transfiguration provides the context which the disciples would eventually need to correctly understand the cross; not as a travesty or a defeat, but as the fulfillment of both the Law (represented by Moses) and the Prophets (represented by Elijah). On the mountain that day, the disciples received unequivocal and explicit confirmation of who they had a hunch Jesus *really* is, “*This is my son, the beloved.*” In other words, Jesus is the REAL Deal.

VII.

As I am sure you all have noticed, we have a few more “candles” than is usual here in the sanctuary this morning. While I cannot attest to the scientific veracity of such a claim, I am convinced that my genetic Mediterranean heritage creates in me a *acute* yearning for the light; sunlight in particular, but lesser light as well. Which, as we all well aware, is hard to come by at this time of year owing to both weather and latitude.

In order to mitigate the dire effects of so much darkness, several years ago I allowed myself a certain liberality when it comes to home decor; which is to say I put up string lights *everywhere*. Over at the manse, there are lights around the dining room window, around the two family room windows, wrapped around the banister of the stairs, draped off the hutch, woven through house plants in the living room, strung from the ceiling in two rooms upstairs and, of course, Christmas lights on the front porch the whole year through (yes, Jeff Foxworthy, I might be a redneck).

VIII.

Out at the cottage, there are multi-color lights around the eaves of the woodshed, around the front of the bunkhouse, inside the front porch of the

house, all along the ceiling of the dining room, kitchen, and up the stairs, and around the big window in the family room and bedroom window upstairs; with low-voltage lights outside in the front garden and going up the stairs to the front porch. Beyond this, there are various accent lights at both the manse and cottage as well.

If the sheer number of lights sounds *excessive* to you, let me offer the assurance that this is *absolutely* the case. As for cost, with the exception of the two Himalayan salt lamps at the manse, and two at the cottage, all of these are LEDs; so a negligible impact on the utility bill. Moreover, I refresh my supply of lights each year by going to local stores during the week before New Year's to shop the marked down section when the Christmas lights are dramatically reduced in price.

IX.

Which is how I stumbled upon *these* a few years ago at Big Lots (*1st set of flameless pillar candles turned on*). Not only are they battery operated and remote controlled, they even have a waxy feel to them on the outside. More importantly, they provide a warm, undulating flicker which quickly allows one to overlook the fact that they are not *real* candles. In my estimation, though, they are certainly *real enough*; and, for the purposes of keeping the darkness at bay, certainly do the trick.

As a person who is always prone to excess, it dawned on me this past winter that if a few of these candles were good, a few more would be even better. So, two weeks ago we these had this next set shipped to us from Etsy (*2nd set of flameless pillar candles turned on*). While the ability to select different colors is a bit of a novelty, they do not not have that waxy feel and, in my estimation, resemble cheap plastic tubes (which, in truth, is what they are).

X.

The real disappointment, though, came when we switched on the flicker option. You are certainly entitled to your own opinion, but for my money I find the effect unnerving; more a distracting strobe than any kind of comforting glow. Given this, we almost immediately decided to return them. However, when Linda contacted the seller they said to just keep them (which was nice) as the return shipping was almost half the purchase price (all of these sets are

just a little north of \$20, batteries not included). So, we have adapted and adjusted by using them without the flicker mode (what I call, “Flashlight mode”).

Undaunted, last week I ordered yet another set of flameless pillar candles. (*3rd set of flameless pillar candles turned on*). While smaller in diameter, these have a bit of a waxy feel to the outside and I admit I like the tone of the light a bit more than the original set; The flicker mode, while acceptable, is not quite as good; though, certainly far superior to the 2nd set.

XI.

What all this demonstrated to me, and why I have offered this little demonstration to you this morning, is that there are different degrees of “realness” inherent in just about every aspect of our lives. While a Big Mac and a homemade BLT on fresh baked multi-grain bread with homegrown tomatoes might each be considered “real” in the sense they are food and fuel for the body, the Big Mac pales in comparison to the BLT in terms of real nutritional value or real taste.

The same is true, economically, with what I refer to as the “Walmarting of America.” That is, when we purchase things at Walmart, or almost any big box retail giant, what our money buys is inevitably some *less* real version of what we seek. It maybe thinner, or lighter, or less durable, or made less well and, almost certainly, will need to be replaced much sooner than if we had purchased something of higher quality, or more real, at a correspondingly greater cost. Of course, we all *know* this at some level, but are content to stick to our Faustian bargain and try to not think too much about it.

XII.

I could go on with examples from other areas, but you get the idea (I am sure). Instead, let us conclude with the one area which is most germane to us: our faith. Based on 30 years of ministry experience, I can comfortably assert that everyone, and I mean *everyone*, has some form of faith as a real aspect or ingredient in their life. The issue, though, is just how *real* it is.

Is it faith of the cheap plastic tube variety, one which is distracting at best, or unnerving at worst? The kind of faith with which we kind of get stuck, and find it too costly or too burdensome to return or exchange; one with which we

just learn to live. Often this is the faith tradition in which we were raised as children, or being absent of any tradition at all. While this kind of faith as “lesser light” might certainly do the trick if we don’t think too much about it, we know in our hearts it is not very “real” and will certainly prove to be not much of a candle in the night against that bottomless darkness which will inevitably come to us all.

XIII.

Another kind of faith is the one which looks and feels so good that we allow ourselves to be fooled into thinking it is actually “real.” Such a faith might come with all kinds of alluring bells and whistles, like the ability to turn it off and on remotely, or change colors to suit the mood, or a timer to automatically conserve energy so one isn’t replacing batteries all the time. Not only is this kind of faith a lot of work, it is nothing *but* work; as whatever “realness” such a faith attains is solely dependent on the effort and energy *we* can muster to put into it.

A final form of faith is one which functions as *transfigurative* light; a light so bright, so alluring, so comforting it utterly removes any question of “realness” from the equation and *fully* satisfies our acute yearning for such a light in our lives. Like Peter, James, and John that day up on the mountain, coming to believe that Jesus is the beloved son, one to whom they should listen; that is to say, the REAL deal.

XIV.

While such a faith does not necessarily remove the doubt or assuage the worry we carry with us at all times, it provides a *deep* certainty that the light Christ is bringing into the world has the power to outshine and overcome *any* darkness; even that which is to be found in all the shadowy recesses of our world. Certainly, it would be nice if we could all just tramp up the mountain one day and witness for ourselves the dazzling light of Christ, and then hear with our own ears the voice of God saying, this is my son, the beloved; the one who is the REAL deal. Given such an experience, there would be little room left for debate about listening to him or not.

XV.

Our experience of Christ, though, is very different than that of Peter, James and John. Rather than merely *seeing* the transfigurative light of Christ, we must *bear witness* to such a light in our lives and to our world. We need to demonstrate to others, and to ourselves, that through God's grace, and God's grace *alone*, we are being transformed and metamorphosed in such a way as to be *outwardly* visible to those around us in ways which are as equally "real" as the REAL Deal who is our God. Amen.