

Gracious Power that Transforms 2021
1 Kings 19:9-12 Mark 9:2-9

1 Kings 19:9-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

Mark 9:2-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

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 anymore, 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.

A friend described his childhood as unhappy, difficult and painful
because his father had been a mean drunk, a violent & abusive man.

He told about when he was a little boy and one particular night
seeing his angry father glaring in the back of a patrol car,
arrested and handcuffed for beating-up his mother again,
he begged the policeman to take his father away
and never to let him come back home again.

But something unexpected happened while his father was in jail.
His father accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord & Savior,
and became a committed and faithful Christian man.

My friend said that he didn't trust or believe it at first,
but when his father returned home he started going to church,
and led his family in prayer and Bible reading each night...
... and from then on never took another drink.

He became a completely different and changed man ... **a real dad.**

Eventually, it was undeniable that the change was real & permanent
which led my friend to become a Christian, like his dad,
for he too wanted to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Before his father's life had been all about alcohol and abuse,
and after, everything was about faith, God's will and purpose.
Something decisive happened that divided his life into two parts.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop,
also **divides the Gospel of Mark into two different sections,**
with **the first part** explaining the true identity of Jesus,

and **the second part** leading toward events of the Passion.

The details in Mark about the transfiguration mark that division,
and also connect with various the Old Testament writings
which reveal who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish...

... just as foretold by the prophet Isaiah (53:5) where we read,

... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that **made us whole**, and by his bruises **we are healed**.

Listen carefully to Mark's description again, vs. 2-4,

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.

So why is the setting on a high mountain - ?

Perhaps to connect to other mountaintop experiences,
such as when Moses received the Ten Commandments, the Law
or where the prophet Elijah defeated the priests of Baal
or where Elijah heard the still small voice of God's call.

So why the dazzling white clothes - ?

Probably as a reflection of God's glory and righteousness,
his divinity blazing brightly through his humanity,
as reminder that Jesus is far more than just a mortal man.

So why are Moses and Elijah there talking with Jesus - ?

perhaps to represent the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament,
to show their connection to God's purpose and grace in Jesus,
and to show that they are subordinate to Jesus, Son of God.

So why do Moses and Elijah disappear and only Jesus remains - ?

It's an important theological sign and metaphor
that the Old Testament demands of the Law fade away
when we receive Jesus who remains present with us,
the bringer and giver of God's grace and mercy.

The details of Mark's telling of the transfiguration story,
are intended to connect with the Old Testament to reveal
more about who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish...

... **but Peter, oblivious to those connections**

was all set to draw up plans & start building... vs.4-6

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."

In the text, Peter was about to miss the point, but mercifully

God put a stop to his ill-conceived building program ... vs. 7

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

In the chapter that came before the passage we read from 1st Kings,
the prophet Elijah had challenged the priests of Baal
to a mountaintop contest intended to discern the truth...

... by each side calling for their god to send fire from the sky
to light the appropriate altar and burn the sacrifice.

The priests of Baal were unable to awaken their gods to respond.
Then when it was Elijah's turn,
the God of Israel responded with a burst of fire
that consumed even the stones & water of the alter.

It was a magnificent and powerful demonstration and victory-
which got Elijah in trouble with Jezebel, the king's pagan wife.

When Jezebel threatened Elijah and vowed to have him killed,
he panicked and fled into the desert wilderness.

In his fear and discouragement, and his sense of hopelessness,
Elijah was hiding, sitting alone in the dark of a cave, and vs. 9,
the Lord asked him, "So what are you doing here, Elijah?"

The prophet answers God's question
with a stream of complaints about how he has been mistreated,
and how all was lost & defeated by powerful forces of evil, vs. 10
"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your
covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are
seeking my life, to take it away."

In patient response, God says, "Go stand out on the mountain,
I want to show you something and I want to teach you something."

We might assume that God will speak boldly to Elijah
through some mighty and impressive show of force, vs. 12

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces
before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not
in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire
a sound of sheer silence.

God doesn't rebuke Elijah for doubting or for not really trusting,
but in a gentle way **speaks to rekindle and encourage his faith.**

The point is, God isn't always in the loud, powerful and obvious ...
... but sometimes, it's in the quiet and reflective
that we can best hear and discern the will of God.

Our gracious God of mystery and mercy, is sometimes,
most visible in moments of deepest darkness and shadow,
most easily heard in the quiet stillness of solitude,
most comforting when we are in most desperate need,
most present at times when we feel we're all alone.

In Hebrew,
the phrase, "sheer silence" is literally, "a thin silence."

A thin silence or thin-place is where we are drawn nearer to God,
where God's gracious love and presence are felt most deeply,
and in that quiet stillness **grace speaks to the heart.**

Arthur C. Brook wrote an article in the Washington Post about
Ludwig van Beethoven complaining about loss of his hearing at 30,
and considering suicide when he became completely deaf at 45.

Yet according to Brook, Beethoven's writing became more original
and more brilliant in **inverse proportion** to his ability to hear...
... his best music culminating with his 9th Symphony while deaf.

The author claims that his later work was especially innovative,
because deafness freed him from hearing other composer's music,
and paradoxically,
silence allowed Beethoven to hear something new.

Elijah had to stop and listen to hear the message of the Lord,
very much like God instructing Peter, vs. 7
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Sometimes in the glitz and razzle-dazzle of this world,
we don't recognize in the quiet and simple, and unadorned,
that which is truly meaningful, blessed and significant...

... sometimes we can get so caught up, busy, distracted and occupied
that we miss it when God is speaking, we may miss the true message.
Yes we notice life's loud wind, the earthquake & fire,
but miss it, when God speaks in the sheer silence.

Sometimes, Jesus comes to us, speaking to us through the silence,
or in our own ordinary and everyday living, for **we too are given**
unexpected moments of God's loving and healing presence.

It might be during a hike in the wilderness, a sunrise or sunset,
the sudden flash of inspiration or insight into Scripture
or the honesty of a friend speaking with care and integrity...
... it's all the many ways, places and times of God present with us.

These unexpected events and experiences are gifts from the Lord,
where and when God mightily & compassionately comes to us
and through which we can see the truth and glory of God...
... special moments filled with God's enduring love & amazing grace.

And my guess is that there are probably
far more such moments & experiences of blessing than we recognize,
that we miss because we're too distracted and preoccupied.

So what is the point of transfiguration and these experiences?

The disciples didn't believe or have any understanding
of the terrible events & suffering just ahead in Jerusalem.

Jesus took them up the mountain to experience something amazing,
that with their own eyes to catch a glimpse of his true glory,
before descending into the valley of the shadow of death,
the horrible suffering & death he'd endure in Jerusalem.

The transfiguration is less about disciples going **up the mountain**
then who Jesus is, the **One who came down** into our wounded world,
and who will go down into Jerusalem to suffer and die for us.

When we are aware and accept grace as God's promise & truth **for us,**
that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,
that same grace has the power to grow and transform us
into living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.

I believe we are called to be attentive and focused against
this world telling us we are hopeless failures and worthless,
or that we're not trying hard enough or our efforts are futile.

The season of Lent begins this week with Ash Wednesday,
when we will pause for Scripture, reflection and prayer,
remembering that we are mortal and God is not,
that we are dust, and to dust we shall surely return.

The season of Lent can be a significant & meaningful time & space,
providing an opportunity to do some spiritual Spring-cleaning,
to focus ourselves toward renewal in preparation for Easter
by growing closer & recommitting our lives to Jesus Christ.

I urge you, don't waste this season,
don't let it just pass you by, don't fail to focus purposefully,
but seek and receive **the full blessings God intends for you.**

Let us wait expectantly, hopefully & use this season of Lent well,
for then we will be more capable of receiving a meaningful Easter,
an Easter more significant than just a new hat or outfit,
or a basket of chocolate bunnies and colorful dyed eggs.

I hope for you, a most amazing and meaningfully abundant Easter,
that begins by appreciating the significance of our journey,
for the journey and travel of Lent are just as important
and almost as significant as the destination itself...

for if we listen, we will surely hear in Jesus
how incredibly much God truly loves each of us...

... for such is the power, the grace, and the promise of our Lord.

So how exactly can that happen? **We need to adjust our focus,
and here are a few specific suggestions:**

- 1st Each day write down a few things you're grateful for,
and all through Lent, keep adding to your list.
- 2nd Refuse to dwell on negativity, resentment or contempt,
but look for all that is positive, notice something good
even when confronted by a difficult situation or person.
- 3rd Recast your past mistakes, failures, regrets & difficulties
into learning experiences & reflect on how you have grown,
and trust God **to forgive & use** even our imperfections for good.

I remind you, that in the context of Mark's Gospel message,
repentance is not primarily regret for sin we've committed,
**but in response to God's initiative, to God's grace and call,
a move toward something far better & toward something more...**

**... for when a person responds extraordinary things can happen,
when we choose faithfulness over our selfishness and apathy.**

Therefore, let our lives proclaim grace, and thanks be to God!