

## How We Shine

*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.

Our confirmands and mentors did a bible study together a couple weeks ago where they read a passage and put the passage into context to better understand it. Something we need to know when trying to interpret an ancient text is how the writer organizes the stories we read inside of the larger narrative arc—the gospel writers are brilliant at this, by the way. So today’s Transfiguration story is the middle pillar of three major pillars in the gospel:

BAPTISM (1:9–11)	<b>TRANSFIGURATION (9:2–9)</b>	CRUCIFIXION (15:33–39)
Heavens torn open	<b>Garments turn white</b>	Sanctuary veil torn open
Dove descends	<b>Cloud descends</b>	Darkness descends
Voice from heaven	<b>Voice from cloud</b>	Jesus’ loud cry
“You are my Son, beloved”	<b>“This is my Son, beloved”</b>	“Truly this man was Son of God”
John the Baptist as Elijah	<b>Moses appears with Elijah</b>	“Is he calling Elijah?”
In the river	On the mountain	On the cross

You can see how these stories follow a similar literary construct, which tells us these three events—baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion—are intentionally related. It helps us to interpret who Jesus is, what the bizarre transfiguration story is all about.

So as we begin, wonder if you have ever had a moment you couldn’t quite explain? A moment which remained a mystery of faith? Maybe it was a mystical happening or an audible voice. Maybe it was a moment when we were overwhelmed with a feeling or an affirmation. Maybe it was a dream we had or an encounter. I remember in seminary I had a professor, a PCUSA minister, who worked as a chaplain in the prisons. He told some crazy stories about some wild Holy Spirit stuff. Well one day, after class, me and a couple other skeptical students approached him and admitted we didn’t necessarily buy into some of the hoo-ha he told. He asked if we were open to praying for experiencing the Holy Spirit. We all said, “Why not!” After all, I’ve tried it before and nothing happened. So the four of us held hands in a circle and he began to pray. As he was praying, I can’t explain it, but I began to feel overwhelmed with bubbly joy. So I began bursting out into laughter—like I was on laughing gas! Then as I’m hysterically laughing my

classmate to the right of me gets slain in the Spirit, and she passes out onto the floor! This, of course, just makes me laugh even harder.

As all this is going on as my classmate to the left of me is just looking at us like we are utterly mad asking, “Uh guys...what is happening right now?” Nothing was happening to him. But to the rest of us we were clearly as scripture says, “Drunk in the Spirit.” I can’t explain it—we all experienced the moment differently. It’s the only time in my life something like that has happened to me. I can’t control it or make it happen again. But it happened. Maybe along your faith journey, you’ve had a mysterious happening you couldn’t explain either?

But I wonder: perhaps that is part of the point. I mean, how often does a revelation with God make sense? Remember Jacob’s dream with the ladder where angels are climbing up and down between heaven and earth? What does he say? “Surely God was in this place and I didn’t realize it.” Or what about Moses chatting it up with a burning bush that tells him to go to the power mongering Pharaoh and demand to let God’s people go. That sounds normal! Or a virgin giving birth at Christmas and a dream to flee from Herod. The Spirit’s flames falling on people who hear good news in their language on Pentecost. St. Paul on the road to Damascus gets blinded by a bright light with Jesus’s voice. The disciples on a mountaintop where Jesus’s clothes dazzle with a bleached white radiance. Is it just me or does God’s glorious revelation not make any sense most of the time! It seems when God’s revelation shows up it’s full of glorious mystery and a strange gravitas. No wonder Peter says, “It is good we are here! Let’s preserve the holiness and take it with us!”

Except here’s the thing: glorious moments don’t last forever. Eventually we come down from the mountaintop. Notice when things go back to “normal” Jesus says something a bit odd to his disciples on the way down. He tells them, “Don’t breathe a word about this to anyone.” Why? Because there is an important part of the story which has yet to happen: the suffering part—the not-so-glorious part. If all we were to capture of God’s glory is a dazzling, radiant beaming Jesus we would more than likely conflate him into a shiny superficial spectacle of power and strength to be worshiped, rather the incarnation of a self-giving, vulnerable God who enters into weakness and powerlessness in the name of love, and then asks his followers to do the same. In our culture we prefer to bask in the glow of Jesus’s radiant glory—I mean who doesn’t—and that is part of the story. But Jesus says “don’t say anything to anyone until after the resurrection” because God’s radiant love isn’t only on display at his baptism, or on the mountaintop. It’s also on display on the cross. And unless we can hold both the “You are my Beloved,” with the, “Why have you forsaken me!”, holding them in sacred tension, we will not, and cannot, fully understand what the depths of God’s love looks like and what the revealing glory of God actually is.

I once visited a woman who was at the end of her life. Hospice had been called into her home, and when I arrived the family was heading out to grab something to eat. She was very hard of hearing, so even though I didn’t like to do it, I had to shout a few inches from her ear. After loudly praying an end-of-life prayer, I yelled in her ear: “You are a beloved child of God!” She just looked up at me and said, “What???”  
“You are a beloved child of God! Jesus loves you!”

Her head suddenly drifted upward as she gazed off into the corner of the ceiling, as if she was peering into another dimension. Then she said excitedly, “I can see you Jesus! I just can’t seem to get to you yet!”

After her eyes averted downward, I didn’t know what to do so I clumsily asked, “So you saw Jesus, huh! What does he look like!

She said, “What???”

“What does Jesus look like?”

“Oh, he is so beautiful! So full of light!”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure what to make of it—my mind was turning over all the rational explanations. But then she smiled with the radiance of an assurance I had never seen before. Friends, no Colgate teeth whitener could have made a smile beam that bright. She died later that night. I know it doesn’t always make sense, but perhaps allowing these moments to remain a mystery simply allows us to bear witness to it with holy awe, saying, “It is good that we are here.”

God’s glory revealed in the beautiful and the sorrowful, in the ordinary and the mundane. Which means God’s glory is right here in our lives as well. And friends, when we share our mountaintop moments and deep valley low moments together, dare I say: I see God’s glory radiating in you—how we shine! And then, I find myself standing in the mystery of holy awe, thinking to myself, “You know, it is good that we are here.” And it is. Always! Amen.