



Why Isn't Your Head in the Clouds?

Mark 9:2-9

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Transfiguration Sunday

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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’s good for us to be here; Let’s make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

He didn’t 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’d seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sometimes church people assume that worship is for everybody, but it is not. Worship is not for practical people. Singing, praying, and listening are questionable uses of time to sensible people.

Worship is as pointless as playing music, sitting quietly with a friend, giving a gift anonymously, reading novels, talking with children, or any other unreasonable activity. Pragmatic people do not find much that is pragmatic in worship.

And worship is not for those who are apathetic. People who never find anything to smile or sing about should not try to worship. People who never laugh out loud or cry until they are out of tears should not bother with worship.

People who can eat Pad Thai without saying thank you may worship. People who can watch a child in a school play without saying thank you will not be able to worship. People who can

get well after a long illness without saying thank you may not be able to worship.

People who can only ask, “What’s in it for me?” should stay away from worship, because until they get a new question, There is nothing in worship for them.

Unfortunately, churches keep trying to get people to come to worship without telling them the real reason to come to worship.

Churches say that they are a friendly church, implying that people should come to worship to make friends. As our culture has become more self-centered, fewer people are attending worship. It just makes sense.

Or we assure people that worship will make them feel good—“It helps me make it through the week”—or stimulate the intellect—“Most Sundays I get something to think about.”

It is the same argument. We tell people that they should worship because it will be to their benefit. We assume that everyone’s focus is on themselves—my feelings, my thoughts, and my needs. I am the center of worship, the object of a series of activities designed to do something for me.

Is it possible that churches peddle friendliness, inspiration, and self-improvement, because they have given up on God? We do not really worship if we think it is for our benefit. That is a hard sell for logical people, and we are logical people.

We are busy looking for ways to be more efficient. We pride ourselves on multi-tasking. I can get this reading done on the train. I can listen to the news while I brush my teeth. I can eat lunch at my desk, again. But this lean cuisine lasagna takes nine minutes. Nine minutes! Are you kidding me?

What will I do during my child’s haircut? I could send texts that might get me out of conversations. I could use my new app that promises I will never have to speak to a bank teller again. I could listen to the first two minutes of the podcast I said I would listen to last week, just so I can say I listened to it.

Our phones burn holes in our pockets. We check our e-mail every few minutes. We are constantly figuring out the fastest way to get there—City mapper, Google maps, and Waze. God forbid we spend three minutes extra getting somewhere.

If someone asks, “What time is it?” what percentage of the time do you think we could guess within 15 minutes? 90%? We are always keeping time, always keeping score. Have you ever been reading a story to your child and realize you are skipping pages because you are in a hurry?

Thinking efficiently keeps us from loving others. Thinking efficiently keeps us from worshipping God. The ones who truly worship are those who see beyond what is logical, beyond themselves, who see the possibility of meeting God.

The end is getting close when Jesus decides to hike up a mountain. Peter, James, and John tag along. These three disciples are not there on the basis of any great insights into the kingdom. They are as dense as their friends.

With their powers of concentration at their usual level, the disciples are, according to Luke’s version of this story, about to doze off when they are startled by a bright light and the sound of voices. The wind is blowing. The dust is swirling. The sun is so bright they have to squint.

When their eyes are finally open they see that Jesus’ face and clothing are shining. They have never seen this glow in the dark Jesus.

Moses and Elijah are there, and, inexplicably, the disciples recognize them. How did they know what they looked like? There were no photographs.

A popular Jewish expectation was that leaders from Israel’s past would appear at the coming of the kingdom. Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, chat with Jesus like they are old friends.

Peter—who never knew when to keep his mouth shut—blurts out, “This is great. Let’s pitch our tents and stay here forever.”

Mark explains Peter's peculiar comment by stating the obvious, "he didn't know what to say." Peter was glad that Matthew omitted that line.

Then a cloud, and from the cloud a voice, "Be quiet. Listen. This is my beloved child."

And it is over as quickly as it began. On their way down the mountain, Jesus says, "It might be better if you don't tell anyone about this for a while."

When they did begin to tell what happened they realized why. This extraordinary event could have been the origin of the expression, "I guess you had to be there."

We cannot explain phantasmagoric details, billowy clouds that speak, theophanies, epiphanies, and blinding lights. When we try to explain mystical moments we sound foolish.

New Testament scholars are not sure what to do with the transfiguration. A century ago it was fashionable to account for it in terms of natural phenomena. On a snowcapped mountain, the location of which is debated, Jesus encountered a pair of men dressed in white robes. The glare of the sun reflected on their robes by the snow was so dazzling that the disciples thought and, well, soon the explanation sounds even more improbable than the story itself.

Some have suggested that this is a misplaced resurrection story that wandered in from the apocryphal Gospel of Peter. The white robes and blinding light make that seem reasonable until you remember that the oldest version of Mark does not include any resurrection accounts. Why would he put one in the middle of his gospel? And why would Matthew and Luke repeat the mistake? And this does not sound like a resurrection scene. This is more like an epiphany, a sudden unexplainable appearance of God.

So what are we to make of this story on the mountaintop? Maybe that way of stating the question points to part of the problem. Our usual response when we read any story is to ask, "What are we to make of this?"

Is it really all up to us to make meaning and significance? We have gotten used to placing ourselves at the center of the world, to judging everything we experience by what we can make out of it.

The transfiguration is not something the disciples are ever able to explain. It is not something they are to make something out of, but rather something from outside that makes something of them.

The message is to stop talking and listen to a voice other than our own. The voice instructs Christ's disciples to pay attention, to keep their eyes open to catch a glimpse of glory.

Why are we in worship today? We are here in spite of all the practical reasons for not being here, in spite of all the restaurants offering brunch specials, in spite of all the things the church does not do well, in spite of all of our shortcomings as worship leaders and worshippers. We are here to look beyond our self to God. We are here because we cannot completely stop believing that God is looking for us and we want to be found.

Where have you met God? Was it at the deathbed of someone you loved—when pain finally gave way to peace? Was it at the moment of birth—where out of the thick clouds of blood a baby was born? Was it in prayer when you knew you were part of something bigger than yourself? Was it in singing a hymn when you felt the beat of God's own heart? Was it in the midst of heartache when a spirit beyond your imagining soothed your battered soul?

God meets us in those moments in which we are pushed beyond ourselves, and if we lose touch with those moments, if we turn our back on them, and do not stop from time to time to notice what is happening to us and around us, and outside us, we run the risk of missing God and losing ourselves.

In his book of prayers, Ted Loder writes, "O timeless God for whom I do not have time, catch me with a sudden stab of beauty or pain or regret that will catch me for a moment and

make me look hard at myself—the unutterable terror and hope within me—and, so, to be caught by you.”

Sometimes we need to go beyond what is logical, to be caught with a sudden stab of beauty, to be caught by a moment of hope. Sometimes, instead of reading the Wall Street Journal, we need to read poetry. Instead of telling our child to hurry up, we need to slow down. Instead of making a list of things to do, we need to make a list of things to see.

We need to give up on winning all the time and give ourselves to things that matter more than winning.

We need to listen to music—and not the music we play when we want people to think we have good taste—the music that makes us smile.

We need to walk the long way home. Eat lunch with a friend. Let the snow make us feel six years old. Read an extra story—even if it goes five minutes past bedtime. Fall in love with the person we love most, all over again.

We need irrational joys, unreasonable dreams, and illogical hopes. We need moments when we feel God’s love.

This sanctuary is set apart for inefficient truths like hope, peace, and joy. We do not come here to become more efficient. We worship to give ourselves to love. We worship knowing that we will not come to the end of our lives and wish we had loved less.

The sacred moments of God’s presence, when we pay attention to our lives, lead us to worship God here.

Sometimes we do not get what we expect when we come to worship. Sometimes there is peace, hope, and joy, but at other times there seems to be nothing at all.

But if we worship with the hope that we will catch a glimpse of God, then there will be moments when the boundaries melt and we find our place in God, when we adore and delight in the one who cares for us, in the one who is with us. God will meet, surprise, and love us.

It is ironic that it is when we worship God, when we love God, that we end up seeing that we are the ones who are loved. Behind all our wants, our deepest questions, and our best answers, we discover in worship that it is God we needed all along.

It is easy to sit in a worship service, aloof and detached, looking down on any sacred hopes. But why would we want to remain uninvolved when we can listen to our souls, leave business as usual, climb up the mountain, stick our heads into the clouds, and open our lives to God?

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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