

The Heart of the Matter
EpiphanyLastB, Mark 9:2-9
Grace Church Newton
February 11, 2024

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“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good...To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Amen.

Today’s gospel passage – this mystical mountaintop experience – is doing a lot of work in the gospel. This section, chapters eight and nine, is right in the middle of the book. It’s a transition between the first seven chapters, in which Jesus comes into public ministry, making himself known through teaching and healing and expelling spirits and the final seven chapters, during which Jesus turns toward Jerusalem and ultimately – or as some commentators would say *inevitably* [[Source 452](#)] – toward the cross.

In Hebrew literary convention – whether it’s in a smaller, coherent portion of a text or in the book as a whole – what happens in the middle is often intended as the key to the meaning of that text. If that’s the case with Mark, what are we learning in this scene at the heart of the gospel? Jesus goes to the mountain and he is transformed before them; his clothes becoming dazzling white, unearthly white; Elijah and Moses – the towering prophetic figures from the Old Testament – appear and stand with Jesus on the high mountain, “talking with him,” we are told; a cloud overshadows them; and from the cloud a voice proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” And then, the disciples look around...and they’re gone. It’s all gone. They only see Jesus.

What is this story at the heart of this gospel trying to say about who Jesus was to the community from which the gospel of Mark emerged?

I started today by saying that this text is working very hard. It is trying to do many things. For our purposes today, let’s focus on two loose categories – it’s not a perfect taxonomy – but let’s call these two categories the *intellectual* meaning and the *spiritual* meaning. I don’t mean to create a dualism between intellect and spirit, so it’s not perfect, but it’ll work for our purposes today.

Let’s start with the *intellectual meaning*. If we were in more of a discussion format, if we were having a Grace Discussion Group conversation about the transfiguration story instead of this more one-way communication, at this point I would ask us this question: “What

echoes of other stories do we hear in this passage? What images, what symbols do we recognize from other parts of the Bible?" We might end up with a list something like this:¹

- I hear Moses, on Mount Sinai. When God calls Moses to receive God's commandments (Exodus 24, 32-24).
- I hear echoes of the prophet Elijah, on Mount Horeb – another name for Mt. Sinai – who was being pursued by Jezebel in fear for his life when God appears on the mountain as a still, small voice (1 Kings 18-19).
- We might think back earlier in the book of Mark when the author explicitly positions the story of Jesus deep within the Jewish tradition, introducing the story with reference to the prophets, proclaiming that Jesus is a continuation of that older story.
- Or we might remember the command of discipleship that Jesus himself has just presented to his followers: "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and **take up their cross** and follow me" (Mark 8:34b).

Here is Jesus, on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. The Law, the prophets, and now the cross. And once this scene has been set, a voice comes from heaven – just as it did in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark after Jesus was baptized. Then, the voice said: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). A validation of Jesus' mission at his baptism and here. Only here, the voice adds, "Listen to him."

Interesting. What are we to listen to? Especially considering that Jesus hasn't said anything. In this whole scene, Jesus is silent. So, we look **back** to see what Jesus **had** said – "take up your cross..." – and we look **forward** to see what Jesus **will do** – turn his face toward Jerusalem and his eventual, inevitable death...on the cross.

As we wrap up with this first, *intellectual* consideration of today's text, I want to pause on the word "cross." This word is not being used in a personal piety kind of way as we might hear it used today – something like "to take on something difficult," or "to deny your own desires." To Mark's audience, there would have been only one understanding of the phrase "take up your cross." According to one scholar: "the turn of phrase could have no other meaning except as an invitation to share the consequences facing those who dared challenge the ultimate hegemony of imperial Rome" [[Source](#), 246]. Jesus was signaling a need face the oppressive power of his day at the potential risk of a violent, public, shameful death.

You may remember that the first recorded words of Jesus in Mark's gospel were to proclaim that the Kingdom of God had drawn near (Mark 1:15). And at the heart of this gospel –

¹ See [Source](#), p. 250, for a discussion of these references and symbols in Mark 9.

right there in the middle – we find Jesus embedded in Jewish tradition, the Law, the prophets, and the cross – his mission being affirmed by the voice from the cloud. These are our associations.

Now for our second way of approaching this text, exploring its potential *spiritual* meaning. The dazzling white clothing, the momentary composition of personalities who never existed in the same space and time, clouds descending, voices from heaven...and then – just as quickly as it happened – it’s gone. One commentator describes this scene as the veil of our reality being rent from top to bottom, giving us a glimpse of what she calls “the really Real” [Source 456]. Or maybe – in church-y language – we might call it a glimpse of glory. The everyday slips away for a moment and behind it we get a glimpse.

I think of the early evening years ago when I was out walking with my youngest son. He was probably three years old and we were taking a walk around the block. There is a corner lot – not much bigger than a lot on which you would build a house – but it’s set aside as conversation land. The boys always called it “the forest.” And they loved to walk on the couple of paths that snaked through it. One evening my youngest son and I were out alone and as we crossed through “the forest,” we stopped in our tracks – just a few feet away was a bunny. And we stared at it, and it stared back at us, and time stopped, and it was magical. For just a moment.

Or the time I was sitting at a parents’ visiting night at the boys’ elementary school. All the faculty were on stage, the principal was speaking – a *lovely* woman in her last year before retiring – and as she spoke, something in *my* experience of the moment just shifted, almost visibly, and the faces, the people on that stage seemed sacred and holy. Their work in this place seemed sacred and holy – shaping young hearts and minds. And then, just as soon as it came, it slipped away. Glimpses of glory.

So, what do we do with this? *Intellectually*, we see Jesus moving toward the cross...and pointing *us* toward the cross. Not just in a spiritualized way. In a risky way. That is a hard truth. And Mark seems to be saying that it is at the heart of discipleship, at least in that place at that time. At the same time, *spiritually*, the reality behind that hard truth, this realm we sometimes catch a glimpse of, is light and love. Our momentary glimpses carry us, and nourish us, and beckon us on. That is part of discipleship, too. This life with God, with each other, with our neighbors, is full. It is rich. It asks much. It offers much. This is what the author of Mark seems to be saying at the heart of his gospel.

As I try to make sense of what Mark tells us about *his* community’s experience of Jesus, *my* thoughts are drawn to another prophet from the Hebrew tradition, the prophet Micah: “He

has shown you, O mortal, what is good," Micah writes. "...To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

This is where my thoughts go. I wonder where your heart and mind take you.

Amen.