

Transfiguration B: Mark 9:2-9  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **The End of Life and the Vision of God**

One of my favorite movies from the 90s is *My Cousin Vinny*. If you've not seen it, Vinny is a loud-mouth New York lawyer with no trial experience who's called to Alabama to defend his nephew who's on trial for a murder he didn't commit. It takes a while for Vinny to figure out how trials work, but once he does, he proceeds to poke holes in all the witnesses' stories. One of the witnesses is an older black woman with coke-bottle glasses. Vinny asks her how long has she been wearing glasses. Since she was six, she says. And have they always been this thick? Oh no, she replies, I've gone through about 10 thicknesses since then. My glasses work just fine now, thank you. Vinny then takes out a 50ft tape measure, asks the woman to hold the end and walks the tape measure to the back of the courtroom. (half the distance she says was when she saw the defendant.) Vinny asks her how many fingers he is holding up. Squinting, she answers four. Vinny then returns to the witness stand holding up his two fingers and shows them to her. What do you think now? Without missing a beat, she replies, I think I need thicker glasses!

As someone who relies on corrective lenses myself, I have sympathy for those who don't see too clearly. And that includes the disciples in Mark's gospel. It's clear, they couldn't see very well, at least they couldn't see Jesus clearly. For, after following him for years, witnessing his miracles and hearing his teachings, they are still blind to who he was. Peter did identify him as the Messiah, the Christ, just before today's lesson, but the image he had of that figure was a little blurry. For when Jesus explained he was going to suffer, be killed, and rise to new life, Peter was having none of it, "God forbid, Lord! This won't happen to you."

After rebuking Peter for his shortsightedness, his "setting his mind on earthy things," Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John, on a hike up a mountain. There, as we just heard, Jesus is transfigured, transformed. His body and even his clothes become dazzling white, radiant with light—not light as from a lightbulb or even the sun, but "uncreated light," heavenly light, divine light, light that emanates from God himself. But it's not just Jesus, Moses and Elijah are there too. Then, all of a sudden, the mountain is enveloped in a cloud, and a voice booms from above, "This is my Son. Listen to him." The disciples are understandably freaked. But before they can recover their nerve, the cloud, the light, Moses and Elijah are gone, vanished, leaving only Jesus.

Coming as this does right after the misunderstanding about his identity, the Transfiguration is Jesus' answer to the disciples' blindness. Their sight was veiled. They couldn't see how all they knew about Jesus fit together, how God would let his Messiah, his Chosen, suffer and die. So Jesus gives them a peek at his divinity. Like a superhero revealing his secret identity. Except that where superheroes hide their *human* identity, it's Jesus' superhuman identity he's been hiding!

And yet the sight Peter, James and John receive there on the mountain is more than simply confirmation that they are following the right guy. What they see is nothing less than a vision of God. They see God face to face.

That is no small thing. This vision, the vision of God, the “beatific vision” has long been recognized by the Church to be the highest good, the *summum bonum*, the ultimate goal of life. Being “saved” is just the start. “The *end* of life is the vision of God,” as one contemporary theologian put it. But this idea goes back way farther than that. It was St Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century who wrote: “The glory of God is man fully alive; *and the life of man is the vision of God.*” Mind you, such a “vision” entails more than just “seeing,” as we “see” a tree or a photo or a page in a book. This vision, the vision of God, involves the direct encounter with the divine, being in God’s awesome presence, enjoying immediate communion with him.

This is what Moses sought when he asked God on Mount Sinai to “Show me your glory.” God declined the request, saying “no one shall see me and live,” instead offering a glimpse of his backside. But now these three blind, bumbling disciples receive that very gift, unsolicited, seeing “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” to use Paul’s words.

But it’s not just the three disciples, but Moses too, who finally receives this vision of God, alongside the prophet Elijah. You may remember how Elijah too sought closeness with God. He was hiding in the wilderness, on the run from the wicked king and queen of Israel, when he curled up under a bush and begged God to put him out of his misery. Melodramatic? Sure. But what he really wanted was God, God’s reassuring presence. So God has him go up *another* mountain and there he was assaulted by a great wind, then an earthquake, then a fire storm, but God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Rather, what he heard was the “sound of sheer silence.” And now, with Moses, Elijah’s desire has been fulfilled, as he sees and speaks with God in-person, in Jesus.

But of course Moses and Elijah’s being there means more than that they finally got wishes realized. Moses and Elijah represent the two pillars, the two parts of the Old Testament—the Law and the Prophets. And so just as their personal longing to see God is realized in Jesus, the Law and the Prophets (which they embody) find their fulfillment in Jesus, too. All the Old Testament promises, of God’s presence to his people, are realized in Jesus. In Jesus we see God in human flesh, holiness revealed in humanity, the glory of God radiating from a Galilean Jew.

But there’s another level at which we can look at the Transfiguration. I learned the other day that the Transfiguration is the first icon that iconographers traditionally paint right after they learn the craft. You know what I mean by ‘icon’—those stylized images of Jesus and the saints that you find in Russian and Greek churches (and in the offices of some clergy). There’s good reason iconographers would start with this subject. For the Transfiguration is what underwrites the making of icons theologically—Just as Jesus revealed divinity in the matter of his humanity, so the matter of wood and paint is capable of revealing the image of the divine. On the other hand, though, the Transfiguration icon contains a deep irony. For at the same time that the Transfiguration is the model for icons, it also shows icons as unnecessary.

Follow me here. Icons, like sacred paintings, sculptures, poetry, even the sacraments themselves are all symbols, visible signs of an invisible reality, God conveyed by created things. But at the Transfiguration, we get God directly, unmediated through wood or paint or words or bread and wine. As vehicles, vessels, they are no longer necessary. It’s like how road signs point to a destination, but, once you reach the destination, you don’t need the sign anymore. You are

already where you were aiming to go. Or, say you are away from your sweetheart, you take a photo to remind you of them. But once you are in their presence again, you don't need the photo any longer. The same is true for icons, music, art, sacraments, and all our attempts to convey God and the things of God. We don't need them when we've got Jesus himself. They are useful for us now, of course, because we can't see the transfigured Jesus. But when Jesus shined forth in all his glory, nothing else was needed.

This is what makes Peter's suggestion that they build tabernacles on the mountain so misguided and so comical. Tabernacles are temporary shelters, tents, and in the Jewish faith, they are symbols of God's presence. This goes back to when the Israelites had escaped Egypt and were wandering in the wilderness. During those forty years, the Lord led them with "a pillar of cloud by day" and "a pillar of fire by night." And God's presence was represented by the tabernacle or tent, which contained the Ark of the Covenant. By Jesus' day, the descendants of those ancient Israelites would build tents outside their houses as part of the Feast of Tabernacles, to remind them of God's presence in the wilderness. But here Peter, James, and John don't need a tabernacle, a container, to remember God. They have the real thing right before them. Indeed, Jesus *is* the tabernacle. The Gospel of John says this explicitly: "And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us," literally "tabernacled" among us. That's what was going on, on that mountain—God "tabernacled" among us. And he was surrounded by a cloud and a light, just like when God was present to their ancestors.

Yes, there is a lot here, a lot of meaning contained in a few concise verses. This story brings together several threads from the Old Testament and weaves them together to show Jesus to be the very image of God, the visible presence the Holy One.

Now, if this were most any other lesson, I'd turn here to talking about the "so what" of the story, to suggest the difference it makes or *should* make for us, how we are to live differently in response. But there is no "so what" to the Transfiguration, no clear command or ethical imperative that we can follow in the coming week. Many a preacher today will preach something like, "You have a mountaintop experience, but then you go back down into the valley to get busy with God's work." Only, this is no "mountaintop experience." This is the revelation of God. It offers no moral, no lesson. It's all about Jesus, about how God is revealed in him.

This vision of God is the end of life, the greatest good we can desire, and as such it puts all other goods aside. All of our efforts—to serve others, to educate, to welcome the stranger, to witness the truth—all of that takes a back seat. Not that they are bad or pointless. Rather in the presence of God all our strivings cease, and our good works relativized.

A perfect example of what I'm talking about is Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was a famous Medieval theologian who was known for writing the *Summa Theologica*, one of the greatest works of systematic theology ever written. Containing 2000-plus pages of the most thoughtful and comprehensive reflection on God, the *Summa* remains *the* textbook for the Roman Catholic Church still today. But, one day as Aquinas was celebrating the Mass, he received a revelation. We don't know what it was, but afterwards he gave up writing, leaving his great masterpiece unfinished. When friends encouraged him to resume his work, he replied, "The end of my labors has come. All that I have written is so much straw after the things that have been revealed to

me.” Aquinas’ great work, his magnum opus, a work that has really not been surpassed even today—so much straw!

Yet, the vision of God is the end to all our words, all deeds, all our fears and desires. In the face of this vision, we are not enjoined to “do” anything. For all is accomplished, all is resolved, every good realized. Ours is only to marvel, to wait, to awe, to stammer in puzzlement and delight, as Peter did. That is to say, the only logical, faithful response to this sight is...to worship. To worship God and enjoy him forever, lost in wonder, love and praise.

You see, before it is anything we do, the Christian faith is about what God does, a gift, self-giving, revelation. To reduce faith to mere morality, to boil down this uncontainable fire to the essentially ethical, is to demean it. Try to lasso a wave, go hold a burning coal in your hands, put out to sea in the middle of a hurricane — that’s closer to the Christian faith than the merely moral. The Transfiguration reminds us of this fact.

And yet, saying that, I have to acknowledge there’s another take-away we see in this story, the same take-away available to Peter, James and John. Like them, we are about to come down off the mountain, to begin the journey that will lead to the Cross. The next six weeks, we will be walking with Jesus towards another mount, the hill of Golgotha, where our Lord will take his place on the cross. The vision we receive today in the Transfiguration is given to sustain us as we make our way there, to strengthen us, and most of all, to help us to see clearly. For with our sight now repaired, our vision corrected, we will see amazing things—see God’s glory in Christ’s Passion, God’s majesty in Jesus’ humiliation, God’s triumph in Jesus’ death. And we will be blessed for it. And so for this gift, this vision, we say, thanks be to God!