

## Mark 9:2-10: **He's Changed**

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Our gospel lesson is from Mark, chapter 9. Listen with me for God's word to us today (CEB):

<sup>2</sup> Six days [after Jesus had predicted his own death,] Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white.

<sup>4</sup> Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup> He said this because he didn't know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So they kept it to themselves, wondering, "What's this 'rising from the dead'?"

He *changed*.

She's different now.

That person revealed something I've never seen before.

How do we respond when we encounter a friend or coworker or family member who has been transformed?

A kind and insightful psychologist named Andrew specializes in helping people return to mental health after traumatic experiences. You've never met him — he's a character in a science fiction TV series that I watched a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> Slowly Andrew's friends discover that this helpful doctor has also become, part of the time, an alien monster who ruthlessly kills certain people because he believes he's called to purify the human race.

Andrew's colleagues react to this disturbing revelation in varying ways. One of them remains grateful that he recently saved her life. Andrew's ex-wife can't understand how she missed the signs. Another friend believes that there's *got* to be a way to save the doctor from what he's become. Someone else floats the idea of stopping Andrew by any means necessary. Clear to all of them is that Andrew has *changed* and is no longer simply the person they thought they knew. I watched those characters onscreen trying to stretch their minds around this new reality.

Or how about a provocative traveling rabbi who heals the physical and spiritual distress of people around him? One day he's taking a few friends for a mountain hike when all of a sudden he starts blazing with unearthly light. "[That] moment and the change it represents are both confusing and terrifying to human witnesses and leave them incapable of responding, except to try to hold

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<sup>1</sup> *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, part of the Marvel Comic Universe.

everything in place.”<sup>2</sup> That last sentence comes from professor Gennifer Brooks who teaches preaching and liturgy.

She reminds us that the text doesn’t let us get away with interpreting this as a gentle glow emanating from an illuminated guru. No, for Jesus and his followers life and death are at stake. Just before this story of Jesus being transformed he predicts to his disciples that he will be rejected by religious leaders, that that will get him killed, *and* that three days later he will rise from the dead. Immediately after this transformation story, Jesus and his disciples encounter a child gripped by an evil spirit that nearly kills that boy. And right after that Jesus again predicts his own death and rising. Mark’s gospel gives us very little time to catch our breath.

This transfiguration story provides a vivid finale to our season of Epiphany, a time that’s been all about the light of Jesus Christ breaking into our world.

It’s also worth remembering what kind of people are witnessing the intensity of that light. The disciples have got no political or religious authority. They might not even know where they’ll get their next meal. For Gennifer Brooks, “this is a moment [when] the glory represented in the whiteness of Jesus’ clothes is splendor that disrupts the status quo.”<sup>3</sup>

Vernon Johns, another Black preacher and the descendant of three enslaved grandparents, delivered powerful and forward-looking sermons in his work as a minister and a civil rights leader. Around 1925 he preached these words about the transfiguration of Jesus:

On the heights is the location for moral discovery.... It is good to be present when the ordinary is transformed; when the dull plain garments of a peasant become shining white, and the obscure “mountain place, [away from everything],” comes into the gaze of centuries. It is good to see the commonplace illumined and the glory of the common people revealed. On the Mount of Transfiguration, there is no representative of wealth, social rank, or official position. The place could boast [of] in the way of population only four poor [persons], members of a despised race, and of the remnant of a subjected and broken nation. But, it is [t]here, instead of Jerusalem or Rome, that the voice of God is heard. It is [t]here, instead of...where the mighty temple stands, that the cloud of glory hovers. Out there, where a carpenter and three fishermen kept vigil with the promise of a new day, God is a living Reality and life is charged with meaning and radiance. Out there in a deserted place, the meek and lowly are enabled.<sup>4</sup>

I love that Rev. Johns perceives that not only is Jesus transfigured in this moment, revealing the glory of God, and equipping Jesus for all he will face. But also the disciples, those underprivileged fishermen, are being transformed by their experience — “the meek and lowly are enabled.” The ones who have almost nothing are the ones who glimpse the infinite and who are given a sacred task. In a world saturated by the dimness of oppression and injustice, Jesus’ disciples will be the ones commissioned to reflect his light.

As Jesus radiates that holy light he’s joined by Moses, through whom God gave the law, and by Elijah, representing God’s persecuted prophets and all they proclaimed to Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Brooks, Gennifer Benjamin. “Mark 9:2-9: Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World.” *Connections: Year B, Volume 1*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2020. Kindle Edition. p. 610.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Johns, Vernon. “Transfigured Moments” (ca. 1925), in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Frank A. Thomas and Martha Simmons. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010. p. 405.

And those poor chosen witnesses? Startled. Confounded. Terrified. Incoherent. WHAT. IS. HAPPENING. “Let’s...set up camp!” Peter blabbers.

While the disciples’ hearts are pounding with fear, right then comes their first clue about how to interpret the moment. “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” says the voice of God from the cloud. God enters the story to speak directly to these disciples who, despite dropping everything to follow Jesus, have only a shadowy understanding of who he actually is. Shortly before this scene Peter has correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, yet he cannot accept that Jesus’ mission will include a brutal death. He tries to reprimand Jesus about that, and Jesus famously retorts, “Get behind me, Satan.”

So this whole transfiguration experience seems to be especially for the disciples’ benefit, to start cracking open their hearts and minds. It will take time for them to grasp what God is up to through Jesus’ death and resurrection. We can empathize with them because a lot of us are still trying to understand it, too. With Peter I’d rather camp out up on the mountaintop than walk down and have to face the cross.

And then there’s the mysterious detail that Jesus commands them not to say anything about this until after his resurrection. Maybe because this cascade of divine light is a tiny preview of God’s power yet to be revealed. As light breaks through ignorance, so resurrection will break through death itself. At the end of this story, Peter, James, and John are left asking each other, “What’s this ‘rising from the dead’?”

How do we respond when a person we know has changed?  
 How do we respond when an experience has the power to change us?  
 How do we respond when it dawns on us that reality itself has changed?

With those questions the transfiguration sets us up for accompanying the disciples down the mountain and toward the cross. Jesus was transfigured so that we might be transformed. That’s a journey that we undertake together as a faith community, starting at 6:00pm this Wednesday when we’ll gather for Ash Wednesday worship. The service will be in Fellowship Hall, and people of all ages are invited into thoughtful, multisensory worship. We hope you will come as together we begin the season of Lent.

And starting today we’re invited into another transformation. Those new church members we welcomed this morning — each of them brings their own experiences, their convictions, their spiritual gifts, their unique ways of reflecting the light of Christ. May those of us who have been here longer show Christlike radical hospitality toward these new companions. And may you our newest members help transform this church into a more faithful, more diverse, more daring community of God’s people.

Only much later after the transfiguration experience would the disciples realize how *big* the mission of Jesus really was, how profoundly God was remaking reality through him. After Jesus’ resurrection things did not go back to normal. That event, even more outrageous than the transfiguration, transformed Jesus from corpse to risen Christ. It transformed his disciples from being petrified to being proclaimers. And it transformed the future from being deathbound to becoming dazzlingly alive.

In the name of God the Radiance, God the Revealer, and God the Resurrection.