

## **Journey to the Top of the Mountain** (Mark 9:2-9)

The journey began before dawn. The trail started out wide and clear. So the going was not too difficult, even in the pre-dawn darkness. The climb was gradual most of the way, as he had been promised. It was the last thousand feet of vertical rise that would test his strength and faith.

The trail would take him from the south base of the mountain, around the eastern slope and up the north face to the top. Soon he was facing the east as the early morning sun peeked through the branches of the trees and began to illuminate his way. This was a good and timely thing because the trail was becoming narrower and harder to discern.

By mid morning he was on the eastern slope. The sun was warm on his face. And it also warmed his spirit as he watched it reflect off a dozen small mountain lakes in the valley he was leaving behind. Soon, those little reflections would be like drops of dew on blades of grass. For now, they were like little glimpses of God. They reminded him that even though he was by himself on the mountain, he was not alone.

By noon he was on the north face. He rested by a cool mountain stream, rushing over rocks worn smooth by the rhythm of the seasons, quenching his thirst and cooling his warm face.

His spirit began to soar as he gazed out over the valley below and onto the next range of mountains. They were snow capped year-round, and were at least a thousand feet higher than "his" mountain. The mid-day sun sparkled off the snowy moraines and

splashed prism-like colors across the valley. More glimpses of God, he decided, as an eagle rose up on the mid-day thermals. It was noon and time to move on. He hoped to reach the summit by three o'clock. He would have to move quickly up the steep north face.

And he did. Soon, as expected, the trail became very steep – almost vertical. The sun was left behind and even though it was not yet mid-afternoon, shadows were lengthening. The climb was physically exhausting as energy was converted into heat. But he pursued the task with a passion and swiftly made his way up the steep and rocky trail.

The steepness of the trail played out sooner than expected as it turned into tall trees. The rocky terrain gave way to cool green grass. Then he came to a small meadow that was glimmering vividly with flowers of yellow and gold. Yet another glimpse of God the hiker thought as he knew he must be nearing the mountain top and this long-anticipated experience.

Then he saw it for the first time, off in the distance – a small cross – standing alone at the edge of the meadow. At first he was disappointed. He had expected something much more awe-inspiring. But – as he walked toward the cross – it seemed glow – and grow – as though it was alive. The closer he came the brighter the cross became and the taller it grew. Disappointment turned to awe as he finally stood before the cross that now towered high above the ground, rising toward heaven, its top vanishing into blue sky.

It was an awesome sight. Surely it must reach all the way to heaven he thought. I reached out and touched the cross. It was alive with the power of God. But it wasn't *rising up* to heaven. I realized it was *reaching down* to earth. I put my ear against its cool surface and heard the voice of God: "In my glory there is suffering, in my suffering there is death, and my death is new life." I stayed at the foot of this cross for a long time and saw the kingdom of God for the first time. Please pray with me:

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you this morning, O God, the source of all hope. We come to the foot of your cross to ask for understanding. Open our hearts and minds to the Scripture read and the word proclaimed, that we might understand that glory and suffering cannot be separated. In the name of your beloved Son we pray. Amen.

I love the mountains. And I love this mythical mountain we just climbed together. What I have just shared with you is a guided meditation. It's one way I take time away to be refreshed. Wherever I am in the world I can make this climb and have a mountain top experience. And it's never the same because God is revealed in a different way each time.

For the disciples – Peter, John and James – the Transfiguration was a mountain top experience. In Mark's story of the Transfiguration God is revealed to them. In their mountain top experience God reveals the divine nature of Jesus: "This is my Son," God says, "the Beloved; listen to him!" The kingdom of God has come to earth! And Peter, James and John are among the first to know it.

But this mountain top experience provides just a glimpse of the kingdom. One minute Jesus is there washed white by the glory of God speaking with Elijah and Moses. In the next minute the window that opened to the kingdom is slammed shut and the scene returns to the ordinary. Jesus is no longer shining and the long-dead prophets have disappeared. The three disciples had a "kingdom moment." They got a glimpse of the kingdom, as God came particularly near to them.

For the readers of Mark, the Transfiguration was viewed as a "heavenly exaltation" of Jesus, just as it is for many of us today. It was seen to be an instance where God was revealed in Jesus Christ. It was a revelation of God. God was revealed to three witnesses.

But it also demonstrates to the world – to the readers of Mark and to us – that the kingdom Jesus had been preaching and teaching about had begun to arrive. God's kingdom comes to earth in and through Jesus Christ. This is one significant truth of the Transfiguration. It signifies the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom has come, indeed.

In my mountain top meditation this morning did you notice those "glimpses of God?" Glimpses of God don't have to come packaged as miracles or signs. They come to us in many different ways. Glimpses of God are nothing less than little windows that God opens up on the kingdom. I like to call them "kingdom moments." Kingdom moments are those times when God is revealed, those times when we get just a little taste of the kingdom. Think about some of your kingdom moments – those times when you have felt God come particularly near. We've all had them, whether we realize it or not.

But there is another important truth that comes with Mark's story of the

Transfiguration. Whenever we study scripture its important to know what leads up to the verses we are studying. If we go back to the end of Chapter 8 we see that Jesus was in Caesarea Philippi – six days earlier – teaching the disciples about the *cross*.

In the last three verses of Chapter 8, Jesus makes the first of his “passion” predictions. He tells the disciples that he “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”

Coming on the heels of Jesus’ first prediction and this connection with suffering, the Transfiguration passage challenges us to take another look at our understanding of how God comes into the world. This is particularly important as we approach the Lenten season. Lent is a time of self-examination. It is also a time for us to consider the connection between suffering and salvation.

Like Peter – who scolded Jesus for his passion prediction – we tend to think of God as coming only in glory. In Jesus Christ we see most clearly the Son of God in his glory. But we often pass over his suffering and perhaps even the cross. The empty cross is a symbol of Christian hope. We sometimes fail to remember that it is also a symbol of suffering and death. It’s hard for us to think of God as suffering. But the truth of the Transfiguration – that important kingdom moment – is that the glory and suffering of God cannot be separated. Our salvation is inexorably connected to suffering! The prophet Isaiah referred to this as the “suffering servant.”

Moses and Elijah come to speak with Jesus at the Transfiguration. It’s important to remember that God spared both from the pain of suffering in death. Moses died quietly across the river from Jericho. Perhaps his pain was falling

short of crossing that river. Elijah was taken straight up to heaven, being spared even death. But this was not to be for Jesus. He must suffer a humiliating death at the hands of his enemies, death on a cross. We can’t ignore that God was on that same cross, between two criminals, and suffering the scandalous and excruciatingly painful death by crucifixion.

As God is revealed in the Transfiguration we are given a glimpse of the kingdom coming on earth in Christ Jesus. But there is a third truth in the Transfiguration. Just as Moses and Elijah are taken back up to heaven, so to will Jesus be taken up. But unlike Moses and Elijah, through the resurrection, Jesus is the real presence of God here in the kingdom that has already come.

Jesus is not simply a figure from the past. It’s through the Risen Christ that God continues to be revealed to us in the here and now. It’s through these little glimpses of the kingdom – these kingdom moments – our own mountain top experiences that we know God is present in our lives. Jesus is the beginning and end of our salvation history – the Alpha and the Omega – the first and the last.

God comes to earth in the glory of Jesus Christ. And in doing so doesn’t escape suffering or even death on a cross. But the good news is that through the resurrection, God is revealed to us in the Risen Christ who lives and dwells with us today. The well-known passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans is an appropriate way to summarize the three truths of the Transfiguration. “Neither death, nor life nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” This is the truth for our lives today.