

The Big Picture
Mark 9: 2-9
Don Lincoln

Who remembers the Argus C3 rangefinder and Kodachrome 25? Many of you have no clue what I just said. Some of you know Kodachrome is a song by Paul Simon. Argus C3 was a camera – actually nicknamed ‘The Brick’ because it came in a brick-colored leather case - and Kodachrome was Kodak’s color film – and it was KING – used by National Geographic; the technicolor film of movies. I grew up in a home where Kodachrome was indeed KING. Kodachrome slides – not photos – slides. My dad took slides, whose color and quality were amazing.

Now with slides you couldn’t just pull out a stack of photos; or photo book. That was the downside. The upside was slide shows – an event. Sitting in the den with my sisters and mom and dad for a slide show of the recent vacation was better than the movies. Bigger than life. Sure, you had to put the slides in the tray – set up the projector, get the 5x5 screen out of the hall closet; find the TV tray to put the projector on. But hey. These were the days when all we had was a black and white TV. And the screen on that TV was about “this big.”

Some of my best memories are slide shows with my family. And you know what some of my worst memories are from those days? When someone invited you over to see THEIR slides. THEIR slides of THEIR trip – or of baby’s Susan’s first time to the ocean – or great grandma’s 95th birthday extravaganza! Because you knew they were going to click through slide after slide after slide, tray after tray after tray – thousands of them, with a running commentary on each, trying to express the feel, the power, the ambiance, the panoramic view of what they had seen and experienced that never shows up on film. And let’s face it – their memories aren’t yours – you weren’t there. They are just not as easy to engage with.

And that's how this spectacular transfiguration story can feel for some of us. We weren’t there. It’s hard to relate when it wasn’t our experience. And my guess is, this brief, biblical snapshot doesn’t come close to depicting the power of what Peter, James and John experienced in those moments. Imagine them describing this to their friends one day. Maybe that’s why Jesus tells them on the way down not to tell anyone. Maybe he knew, it just wouldn’t translate. Nobody would get it until after resurrection.

Maybe you’ve never had anything like the transfiguration happen in your life. A vision of Jesus, glowing bright as the noonday sun, with Moses and Elijah in a little mountaintop conversation. Anybody? So maybe you’re a little curious. Or even a little skeptical – or more than a little.

Did you ever ask yourself why only Peter, James and John got to see the show? Why them, and none of the other nine disciples? What made those three so special? Might Judas have acted differently if he had been allowed? Scripture never explains.

Some people try to explain what is going on here. Peter was the eldest; John the youngest. I've heard a whole sermon about how this shows Jesus wanted to prove age doesn't matter in leadership. Or the fact that John is reported to have lived the longest while James was the first disciple to be martyred. So, spiritual experiences don't guarantee longevity. Okay.....that'll preach, but I'm not doing that today!

I used to think maybe these three were Jesus' favorites – that they were the INNER inner circle. Do you think Jesus had favorites? Some of us may wonder if Jesus still does? But the further down the road I've gotten in life and faith, I've come to wonder, could it be this happened to Peter, James and John because these three needed more convincing – needed a more powerful, personal experience than the others – their hearts and minds weren't fully satisfied? Maybe that had not opened them to see and opened them to hear as they were walking with Jesus. We simply don't know from this text.

I can tell you I DO believe this event really happened. This is another one of those instances in Scripture where the content of the story itself gives credence to its historicity. I mean, look at what Mark includes in his text.

First off – the descriptive, earthy language he uses for Jesus' garments. "Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller (launderer) on earth could bleach them." Really? Laundromat language right here in the gospel! Did you catch that? Whiter than any launderer could launder them; whiter than white. After the Super Bowl ads, you might say even whiter than TIDE could get them! Who would make up a phrase like that? It has the ring – the sound – of an eyewitness description.

Secondly, did you hear what the text says about Peter? Remember – Mark wasn't there. He's hearing this story as it's been told by someone who was. Peter, James or John. One of them has told the Gospel author about this event. And what is said about Peter? Imagine that it is James or John and not Peter telling this story. I can just hear it.....

"Yeah, and Jesus was shining dazzling white – whiter than Clorox – and Moses and Elijah showed up – and they were talking on top of the mountain.....and you know what Peter said? He said, "Let's build tents for all three of you right here!"

What an idiot. Like really Peter? Just like Peter. No silence was ever so deep that Peter couldn't try to fill it with words!¹ "Let's build shrines. Let's build each of you a holy tabernacle." Like Elijah and Moses – who live with God – would be interested in trading heaven for a 10x12 shack on some mountain in the Middle East? Really Peter?"

You simply can't make this stuff up. Which is why New Testament scholar NT Wright says this: "The sheer oddity of Peter's bumbling suggestion is itself strong evidence of

the story's basic truth. Nobody inventing a tale like this would make up such a comic moment, lowering the tone of the occasion in such a fashion.²

I don't know why this experience was given to these three. Any more than I know why certain people have certain experiences, and others don't. What I do believe, however, is that it happened.

And I believe they happen to all of us. Maybe not a transfiguration but moments that transcend – God moments – moments of purpose, of message, of reminder, of comfort – moments that equip us or confront us – challenge us or take us to our knees. Spiritual moments that speak to that deep place inside – the place which has been evident in every single human heart since the beginning of creation – a place that hungers to know purpose, reason, meaning.

And it seems to me that while everyone has access to those moments, they're all different. Sometimes tailor-made just for us, so it seems.

Just what we need, at a point in time – if we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart willing to recognize them. Which not everyone has. Some don't believe; don't buy it – or ignore what is in front of them. But I don't believe for a moment they don't happen to all of us – **glimpses of glory**.

I remember in a book I have of letters children have written to God. One of them goes like this:

Dear God: my mom always told me orange doesn't go with purple. I believed her until I saw the sunset You made on Tuesday. That was cool. Thanks. Love, Eugene

One of those moments that transcends.

Professor Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "There are certain moments in life that cannot be replicated – unprogrammed concurrences of emotional, mental and spiritual trajectories that, because of their power, change our lives for the better.³ I'm certain something powerful and unique happened to Jesus on that mountain, but if it had just been for Jesus' benefit, he could've gone alone. The three needed to see, to experience, and to hear that voice, "Listen to him!" And even more so that they would share the story, tell it. Thanks be to God they did.

I remember the time a young couple in my congregation – who had great difficulty conceiving a child, and then because of her diabetes, had a very difficult and high risk pregnancy – she spent the last 4 months in the hospital. They asked me to come visit at their house shortly after the baby was born. The father invited me into the living room, where mom was seated. Dad pulled out the giant portfolio, hardbound photo book with the massive photos he had taken with his sophisticated camera with motor drive, high speed flash, wide angle lens. "Oh boy....."

Well, he opened the folder with glee, and the first shot was of the incision for the C-section being made – and it went on from there – frame by frame in technicolor – up to and including the first attempts at nursing. It was more than I needed to see, and my only thought was, “I need to disengage and get out of here as soon as I can. But then I heard a whimper on the baby monitor.”

Mom stepped out, and returned with this tiny, precious little one in her arms. “Her name is Grace.” Tears were rolling down her cheeks. The dad said to me “Pastor Don, would you hold her and pray for her?” His eyes were filled. I will never forget the power of that moment. None of it showed up on film. Just that moment. And it’s why I tell stories like that.

I’m guessing that’s what happened to Mark when he heard this story. Even though it was only a snapshot – it was enough to hear the testimony that came with it. To hear in James’ voice, or see on John’s face – the power so moved by what they had experienced. To be so moved by what they said, that Mark wanted to make sure he included THIS story in his gospel.

And, after all, isn’t that basically what we’ve got? A text that is full of snapshots of the experiences God’s people have had through the ages, that they couldn’t keep to themselves, **so that you and I would get the big picture.** Thanks be to God.

This week we begin our Lenten journey – revisiting stories of Jesus. In sermons, in worship, in small groups, in Bible Studies. My prayer is along the journey, we take the opportunity to share the stories of what we have seen and heard. Glimpses of glory. Because you never know who else they may bless. May it be so. AMEN.

1. New Interpreters Bible
2. NT Wright, Mark for Everyone, commentary on the Gospel of Mark
3. Brueggeman, Texts for Preaching, commentary on the NRSV.