

**Transfiguration**  
**Mark 9: 2-9**  
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We are collectively living through a stretch of time in which days look and feel the same, and in which many of us don't have the normal boundaries to separate home, work, school, social life, etc. And so, perhaps more than ever, holidays become our best vantage points for discerning the passage of time. Once again, this year the liturgical calendar and Hallmark calendar have intersected as today is both Transfiguration Sunday and Valentine's Day. So let us ascend the mountain with Jesus this day, and from the height of the summit look to what is both behind and ahead of us.

Rachel and I were looking at some photo albums this weekend and came across photos from when we met at a wedding in the summer of 2005. I don't know if this is still a thing or not, but at this particular wedding reception there were disposable cameras placed all



around the venue for guests to capture spontaneous moments the official photographer might miss. Someone, we found out months later, had actually managed to get photographic proof, in a few snapshots, of an introductory conversation that lasted the entire reception, led to a first date, and proved to be a defining moment in our lives.

How we received these photos is a romantic throwback to old technology. At some point those disposable cameras were taken to a photo development center and the film was removed. Then someone took the film with the negative images....remember negatives?...those miniature inversely colored images that would be used to create your photos through a several hour process? So after that process, the bride and groom received a stack of photos along with the negatives, noticed the photos of us and when the time was right mailed them to us. Not exactly Airdrop but it worked.

In the narrative of Mark's Gospel, the Transfiguration is a defining moment made all the more powerful because of the way it reaches for and gathers other defining moments.

First, you have the setting on a mountain and the immediate association with the monumental events of Israel's past, the most obvious of which is receiving the law at Mt. Sinai. This brings attention secondly to the company present at this event. Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus and after he is transfigured all of the sudden Moses and Elijah, who together represent the entire weight of the law and the

prophets are there too, just talking with Jesus. It's jarring - it's kind of like when we see former presidents together talking at events, individuals we've always conceptualized separately without overlap. We wonder, what could Jesus, Moses, and Elijah possibly be talking about? Are they swapping dramatic mountain stories? Debating who encountered the most tyrannical power figure? Commiserating about the recalcitrance of God's people? Only God knows I suppose.

Third, this description of Jesus whose clothes became dazzling white evokes one of the most mysterious and apocalyptic, or revelatory texts of the Old Testament in Daniel 7 and its description of the Ancient of Days whose clothing was white as snow. Finally, the voice from the cloud speaks words echoing what was spoken at Jesus' baptism; "This is my Son, the Beloved." All of these powerful symbols and images from the past rushing forward into the present and focusing in on Jesus.

But the Transfiguration doesn't just invite us to look to the past nor does it invite us to camp out in the present. In its placement in Mark's narrative, in subtle ways in the text itself, and what it has become in Christian tradition, the Transfiguration invites us to look ahead. When we read this passage in context, we will notice that it is sandwiched between two conversations Jesus has with the disciples in which he talks about the suffering that awaits him as they make their way towards Jerusalem. From this point on in the story, there is unwavering momentum towards the cross.

And to understand what is happening in Mark 9 on the mountain, we have to bring the cross into view. Jesus had already been doing as much in his discourse with the disciples, and unsurprisingly was met with resistance, particularly from Peter. In the section right before the Transfiguration Peter went so far as to rebuke Jesus for talking about his own suffering and death. And so as awkward as his response is to what was happening on the mountain, we can understand Peter's impulse to preserve the moment. Surely this epiphany of God's glory meant that the suffering Jesus had been talking about could be avoided, right?

But just as quickly as it all happened it was over as the voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son the Beloved. Listen to him!" And only Jesus remained. I imagine it was a long walk down the mountain as the realization of the inevitability of what was to come sank in. What happened on the mountain wasn't a detour after all. Nor was it a destination. It was only part of the picture of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah, to be God's Son.

Like a photograph and its negative, the mount of Transfiguration and the cross of Calvary are two images of the same glory. I'm grateful to biblical commentator Shannon Schaefer for this metaphor and how she expands on it. The glory the disciples witnessed on the mountain is the same glory won on the cross, though in a seemingly inverse relationship. Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah on the mountain but is flanked by thieves on the cross. He is clothed in dazzling white but then naked on the cross with a crown of thorns. "This is my Son, the beloved" turns to "My God my God why have you forsaken me."

Peter, James, and John caught a glimpse of the glory of God shining brightly in and through Jesus. But what they would come to learn, and what followers of Jesus have been called to learn ever since, is that the abundant glory to be found in the coming kingdom of God is found precisely to the extent that we embody the self-giving, self-emptying, suffering love of Christ.

And should we resist this call of the gospel, should we prefer shortcuts and detours to glory that would circumnavigate anything that would ask us to lay our life down, the liturgical calendar has a timely reminder for us in just a few days. This Wednesday, whether you come by the church at midday or stream our Ash Wednesday services in the morning or evening, you will be invited to mark yourself with the sign of the cross and to remember that from dust you came and to dust you shall return.

So, on this Transfiguration Sunday, let us now come down the mountain with Jesus and follow him because the mountain is not a detour nor a destination. And let us join him in his dying so that we may also join him in his rising.

Amen.

## **Resources**

<http://www.ekkleziaproject.org/blog/2018/02/developing-the-negatives/>