

Rev. Melanie Smith
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9.2-9

Here All Along

A few years ago, my friend, Petra and I decided to go backpacking on the Appalachian Trail. At the time, neither she nor I, had a lot of experience backpacking but we had enough that we felt ready for an adventure.

We made plans to hike a section of the AT that hugged the Eastern boarder of TN and crossed over into North Carolina—this portion of the trail is known for it's sweeping views of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The first day of our journey led us through beautiful hillsides, wide open meadows and tree canopied valleys.

Along with beautiful views, part of the magic of the AT, is that the fellow hikers and backpackers you meet along the way become fast friends; swapping stories, sharing supplies and most importantly passing down weather reports.

This last piece was all the more important because while Petra and I had the gear and supplies we needed—we hadn't paid close attention to the weather report, especially, the weather report for the mountains.

Because something the guide books we read and maps we were following failed to mention, was that the higher you climb in elevation, the faster the storms roll in.

As Petra and I started out on the second day of our adventure, the sky was clear and the trail was enveloped by trees. By late afternoon the terrain changed from a steady incline to a very steep climb—and as the terrain changed, so did the weather.

As we gained in elevation the clouds moved in quickly, and the once visible trail in front of us, began to shrink—in what felt like the blink of an eye, I went from being able to see clearly in front and all around me, to barely being able to see the trail beneath my feet.

Another disconcerting feeling was that, while we had been sheltered from the wind by trees, suddenly the wind was whipping all around us in a way that made us realize, that while we couldn't see it, the trees were now behind us, and we were fully exposed. This most likely meant, that we were hiking with cliffs on either side, on a trail we could barely see, and, by this time, we were soaking wet from the cloud cover.

Afraid we were in danger of getting lost, we made the decision to stop. Tired, wet, and cold, we climbed into our tent for the night. In the morning, we opened our tent doors to an absolute shock. We had pitched our tent just a few feet from the trail in a completely safe location, and below us, as far as our eyes could see, stretched the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The view we had been unable to see amidst the clouds, had been there all along.

In our story today, Peter, James and John head out on a hike with Jesus. As they make the climb up the mountain, and arrive at the top, suddenly their Rabbi, their teacher and friend whom they have known and followed for years, takes on a new form.

Only it isn't a new form at all. The word used to describe what happened to Jesus on the mountain is "Transfigured" which is similar to, and yet, altogether different from the word transformed—Transformation is described as "a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance" While transfiguration is "an exalting, a glorifying or a spiritual change."

One way to think about this, is transformation is what happens when a caterpillar enters their cocoon, and emerges as a butterfly.

While Transfiguration is a revealing of what has been present all along—only our eyes were unable to see it.

As Jesus' clothes turned from their typical every day appearance, to the bright dazzling white—as Moses and Elijah—two of the great prophets and leaders of the Israelite people—appeared alongside Jesus—as the voice boomed from heaven—the true identity of Jesus was revealed—the veil that hid the glory of God's full presence in this dusty, wandering and itinerant Rabbi, was lifted and for a brief moment— Peter, James and John saw fully who Jesus was, the beloved son of God.

Jesus' identity—his full glory had always been there—we even hear it spoken over him at his baptism. As Jesus came up from the waters, the Holy Spirit alighted on his shoulder and a voice from heaven proclaimed, you are my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus started his ministry with these words—an affirmation of his identity—solidly planted in his soul and ringing in his ears.

And it's here on the mountain, that his identity is affirmed again, this time, not just for himself, but for his disciples to see and hear—this time, Peter James and John hear and see that the one they are following is not simply their friend who gets tired and hungry, who can heal the blind and cure the sick, their friend who teaches in synagogues and challenges the powerful—but he is also the beloved Son of God—an identity that may not always be seen with the naked eye, but is always there just below the surface.

This transfiguration is not only true for Jesus—but also for you and for me.

Every time we gather at the font to welcome a new member into the household of faith through baptism—we proclaim the promise—that through these waters we are united with Christ into his baptism and brought into the family of God where we hear the words proclaimed, that we are indeed, beloved children of God.

This isn't a transformation—we are not changed into something altogether different than we were before baptism—instead we are transfigured—our belovedness, which was spoken over us by God from the beginning, is revealed.

It's easy to say all these things—it's much harder to see them in action in our day to day life.

Day in and day out, it often feels more like wandering in valleys, or climbing up hills barely able to see the trail in front of us.

And yet there are glimmers, moments when the clouds part, when the veil that obstructs our vision is lifted and we see God's full presence in our midst—moments when we're able to proclaim to each other that you, yes you are a beloved child of God, and moments when we're able to recognize and affirm our own belovedness.

On this Transfiguration Sunday—we are invited up the mountain--to sit in the mystery and to gaze at the world and each other in wonder because God's glory and our belovedness have been here all along—may we have eyes to see it and words to proclaim it. Amen