“A Glimpse of Heaven”

Transfiguration Sunday, 5th Sunday after Epiphany, Feb. 11, 2018, Year B

Mark 9:2-9

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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Twenty years ago I had a mountain-top experience of God, except I wasn’t on a mountain. I was at my kitchen sink doing the dishes, looking out the window and up at the beautiful blue sky and fluffy, white clouds. My daughter and I had just returned from a Good Friday service at our church. The noontime service marked the ending of the all-night Maundy Thursday vigil, which had begun the night before with the telling of the passion story and the extinguishing of the light of Christ.

I had recently returned to church after shunning organized religion for most of my young adult life. Now that I had a child, I felt she needed to at least be brought up in a church tradition, and after graduation, she could choose her own way. On this particular Good Friday, she was about seven years old.

So, I was doing the dishes, looking out my kitchen window, and I saw this majestic cloud in the sky. It was large and fluffy and it was moving and changing in the wind, like all clouds do. But then, as I watched, it clearly formed into the image of a face. It was a face I recognized from one of Michelangelo’s famous paintings. It was the face of God.

God’s face was that of a wise, ancient man. He had a long, angular face, a head of abundant white hair, a full mustache, and full, white beard. His expression was one of triumph and majesty, as he sailed through the skies on the currents of air.

I was stunned, almost speechless. But I managed to call out to my daughter, “Come here! Look at this!” I lifted her up to see out the window. “Do you see that face in the sky? Who does it look like?” She started to cry, afraid of either the cloud or my excited reaction to it.

Then, the cloud changed shape. God’s face melted away and the clouds re-formed into the face of a much younger man. He was also bearded but his hair was not as luxurious as God’s. His eyes were soft and had a wise expression.

“Look, can you see it?” I practically shouted at my daughter. “It looks like Jesus!” And then she began to cry harder. “I don’t want to look at it!” she sobbed. So I let her down gently and tried to comfort her, all the while staring out the window. Jesus’ face slowly faded away, leaving no trace of the cloud’s transfiguration. That Good Friday experience left me with the assurance that the gospel story is real and that God wanted me to know it.

There aren’t many places in our lives that we can tell a story like this. Church is a safe place to do it because many of us have had transcendent experiences like mine. Sometimes during meditation some people feel transported to another place, or see or hear things that are not of this world. People who practice yoga say similar things. A young pastor I know had a spiritual revelation which left her crying while riding the exercise bicycle at the gym.

It’s important to hang onto these transfiguration moments, as they are signs that God is real, and that the work God gives us to do is real. What happens to us when we feel we’ve left our bodies for an instant, or heard an invisible voice calling to us? We might feel frightened, disbelieving, and certainly not willing to tell anyone else about it.

The other question is how do *we* react when someone else tells us about a spiritual experience they’ve had? Even if we have had a vision of our own, it’s sometimes hard to believe another person’s account. We might question their sanity, or we might want to think we are the only “chosen of God,” favored especially to hear from the Most Holy One.

The disciples who climbed with Jesus to that mountain top were certainly frightened at what they saw. One minute Jesus was there with them, looking just like any other man. The next minute he was hanging in the air with his clothes dazzling white as the sun, and on either side of him, were two beloved Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Moses.

The disciple Peter bumbles and fumbles his way into saying ridiculous things like, “Hey, let’s build a house for each of you!” And the others must have looked at him like he was crazy, that is, if they were able to tear their eyes away from the startling vision.

Then a booming voice came out of a cloud saying, “This is my Son, whom I love! Listen to him!” And then, as if it had never happened, the voice ceased, the cloud vanished, Elijah and Moses were gone, and Jesus was standing there with them, clothed in his simple garments again.

When they were coming down the mountain, Jesus told them not to tell anyone what they saw. I wonder if the real reason they didn’t tell anyone at first was because they didn’t want people to think they had lost their minds. Memory is a funny thing. The further in time we get away from mystical experiences we’ve had, the hazier they get, until we can safely store them away and forget about them - for our own sanity and to save ourselves from the negative reactions of others.

The season of Lent begins this Ash Wednesday. Lent is a 40-day time of inner reflection and outer resolve to make some long-overdue changes in our lives. It is also a time to let our guard down and accept, and even pursue, transcendent encounters with God. Our church offers a meditation group, a yoga class, and a weekly Bible and book study to help us along on our quest for God’s touch.

And during the season of Lent, it has been our tradition to hear from our church members who are brave enough to share their “mountain-top” experiences with us in worship. We bring out our “Lenten scale” to weigh, week by week, the long-buried stories within us that we have not dared to share with anyone before. When we trust enough in God’s presence, and are confident in the respectful listening of others here, beautiful things happen. We are freed of our hesitance to announce God’s presence in our lives, and we free others to admit that, yes, they’ve had something similar happen to them.

Our hidden stories reveal who we are and how we experience God. By telling our stories, we hope to inspire others to tell theirs. We hope to affirm, by public declaration, that there really is a God who longs to communicate with us, however and wherever God chooses. And, in this way, we can all catch a brief glimpse of heaven here on earth.

The boundary between heaven and earth, between humanity and the Divine, comes together in the person of Jesus. Jesus revealed to us what God is like: that was his purpose in life. He taught; he healed; he dazzled; he confused. He blessed; he criticized; he fed; he forgave.

These are all the ways *God* comes to us now. We just need to be perceptive enough to catch on to what God is doing.

God teaches us lessons in every single moment of our lives, lessons like patience, kindness, attentiveness, and understanding that help us get along better with others. God heals us through the compassion of another who understands our pain.

God dazzles us with sunrises and sunsets so lovely they take our breath away.

God confuses us when bad things happen to good people.

God blesses us with simple pleasures, like a kindly smile or a word of encouragement from a friend.

God criticizes our small-mindedness with that tender tweak of regret for a sharp word spoken or an encouraging word unspoken.

God feeds our bodies, souls, and minds with life-giving insights and even visions. God forgives us our faults, our starts and stops, and our rough ways that God hopes to eventually make smooth.

But in order for God’s acts to become known in the world, we need to share our own witness with others. This is how the gospel spread so quickly back in ancient times. When people were transformed by what they learned from an encounter with another Christian, they didn’t keep it to themselves. They told others of the joy and freedom they had found in this new way of living. Because that’s what Christianity is – it’s not just *what* we believe; it’s how we *express* what we believe. As Saint Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel often; when necessary, use words.”

Let’s all help spread the word about how God has transformed our lives. Dare to share our stories about how God’s powerful love and grace broke into our lives and changed us forever. Take a chance on telling another about our mountain-top transfigurations. Keep the Light of Christ alive for the next generation.

In all these ways, we will keep our own faith alive, perhaps plant the seed of faith in another and maybe even grow this church. Thanks be to our God, who comes to us in rain and wind, in sun and clouds, and in the mountains and in the valleys. Thanks to our God through whom we can do all things. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol.4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 452-457.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).