

Descending to Share the Story

February 14, 2021

Mark 9: 2-9

² Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

2nd Corinthians 4: 3-6

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.



How many of you have had a true “mountaintop experience”? Maybe you have been up Black Elk Peak and taken in the vastness of the Black Hills and plains beyond. Maybe you have climbed a 14er in Colorado or another state blessed with the Rocky Mountains. Here is a picture of one man’s mountaintop experience. These experiences usually have several layers to them. For this person, it is a clear day so he can see for miles and miles. He can see other mountain tops off in the distance. Perhaps down in the valleys are lakes or streams that teem with life. Maybe he can hear the chirp of coneys or rock badgers or the song or call of birds that soar on the updrafts. There is also a sense of awe or grandeur that one feels when out there in God’s creation in a scene like this. One feels both the immensity of God and the smallness of oneself. The air is usually clear and crisp, even in the middle of the summer. In your lungs you may even feel a bit short of breath as the air is thinner at elevation. But this is not the only kind of mountaintop experience that people have.

I have twice been up Bomber Mountain in the nearby Bighorns and plan on going again this July. All of what I described above applies. The sights, the sounds, the clear air, the immensity of God’s creation – all of this is part of ascending Bomber Mountain. I imagine all of this was part of the disciples’ experience as they ascended that mountain with Jesus on what is commonly known as Transfiguration Sunday. But there is also another side to my Bomber Mountain experiences – we will also see this other side in the experience of James, John, and Peter as Jesus was transfigured before their eyes.

Here is a picture from Bomber Mountain. "*On or about June 28, 1945*" as the plaque at the base of the mountain says, there was a wild snowstorm raging in the Bighorns. It was on or about this day during World



War II that a B-52 bomber crashed onto the top of the mountain. The crew of ten soldiers – four lieutenants and six sergeants - died in the crash or in the hours shortly thereafter. Strewn across the mountaintop are the remains of that B-52, as you can see in this picture. Various parts of the plane are scattered for several hundred yards, heading off to the northwest – seats, engine parts, tires and landing gear, fuselage pieces, parts of wings. There is a solemn feeling that comes over one when walking amongst the wreckage. There is a different sense of God as one ponders that fateful day and the experiences of those soldiers atop the mountain. One gains a sense of eternity atop the mountain. Peter, James, and John must have felt similar emotions as they stood there that day in the presence of Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. As we delve into our passage from 2nd Corinthians 4 and into Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration, let us pray...



The events and happenings of Transfiguration Sunday have always been surrounded by a sense of mystery. It happened and then many years passed before it was again the subject of conversation. This mystery often surrounds our faith. Turn with me to 2nd Corinthians 4 as we explore this idea through Paul's writing about the mystery of the gospel.

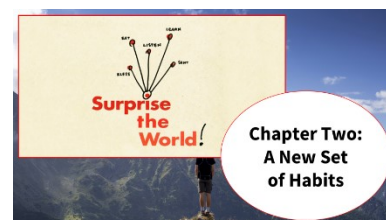
In verse three Paul begins by acknowledging that to some, the gospel is veiled. He continues, noting that it is veiled to those who are perishing. Here Paul is speaking of those whose destiny is not heaven. Paul is speaking of those blinded by the gods of this world. For these folks, there is no room, no space, no possibility of *"seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"*. As you think about this spiritual blindness that Paul brings to mind, how many of you know someone who is so enamored or enthralled with the things of this world, that faith barely has a chance? There is no room for anything or anyone other than self. Truly, many are "blinded" by the gods of this world. Left to their own, there is little chance that they might see the light of the gospel. That is why it is so important that we live "highly questionable lives" – lives that make even those totally committed to the ways of the world stop and take notice of how and why we live for Jesus Christ and our brothers and sisters of his world.

Paul and his fellow apostles and disciples preach about someone who is no longer living. For those of the world, to hear that these Christians follow and worship a man who was alive, but was killed by the Romans, is foolish. To make the choice to become a *"slave"* to this Jesus is even more outlandish to them. Why would anyone ever dedicate themselves to one who cannot give them any tangible earthly reward? How could this possibly be worth their time? If following Jesus does not increase their net worth or get them to a higher place on the social or corporate ladder, then "no thank you" is their initial answer.

In verse six Paul reminds us that it was God that said, *"let light shine out of darkness"*. Unlike the light that emanated from Jesus that day atop the mountain, this light is not a physical light but a spiritual light. This light of God shines in the hearts of all who believe, bringing us the *"knowledge of the glory of God"* as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is only when the Lord finds a home in our hearts that God's light begins to shine. To welcome Jesus into our hearts, to ask him to be our Lord and Savior, this is a choice that one must make. Once we have decided to follow Jesus his light grows within us. Eventually that light begins to shine out from us too as we begin to live out Jesus' example of loving others and as we begin to follow his model for obedience to God. It is in living for and like Christ that we begin to live those highly questionable lives.



In order to live highly questionable lives, we must practice habits or find regular rhythms that change or even transform our everyday lives. The reality is that we all have habits. Some are good and edifying habits and some as bad and detrimental habits. Chapter 2 in "Surprise the World" is called "A New Set of Habits". Through his study of individuals, author Michael Frost discovered that a person's habits help to define his or her values. As an example, Frost compared our grandparents' habit of daily "quiet time" to most people's practice of "quiet time" today. For those in our grandparent's generation, "quiet time" was dedicated Bible study, often each day of the week. They would dedicate at least an hour each day to delving into God's word. Today, for our generation of Christians, the typical quiet time involves reading a short reflection



from something like the Upper Room and maybe reading the suggested scripture. For the younger generation of Christians, daily quiet time is most likely an audio devotional listened to in the car on the way to school or work. With each succeeding generation there has been a corresponding change in our values. In general, we are no longer a people who value daily Bible study. Therefore, our Bible literacy is not very good. One of the habits in the book addresses this issue.

As one considers the future of the church, things like online worship, digital faith communities, and a shift away from the building are present realities. Ministry will continue to look different in the next generations. For most in the early stages of faith, being in mission is a very important component of their growing faith. Young people want to make a difference, to be the change, to be involved. In the heart of the book, Frost develops five missional habits that are designed to “surprise the world”. In chapter two Frost define missional habits this way: “all we say and do that alerts others to the reign of God”. By living out highly questionable lives we practice missional habits on a regular basis and by doing so we will make others aware of God’s reign breaking into their everyday lives.



The five habits that we will delve into over the next five weeks are bless, eat, listen, learn, and sent. Again, practicing habits will come to define values.

As we practice blessing others, it will shape who we are and what we value. As we bless others, we will become more generous. As we eat with others, we will become more hospitable. As we listen to the Holy Spirit, we will become more Spirit-led. As we learn more about Jesus, we will become more Christ-like. As we come to see ourselves as sent into the world, we will become more missional. As we continue on into Lent, we will dive into one habit each week as we seek to become a church of highly missional people. We will strive to develop these habits or rhythms as regular parts of our everyday lives.



Turning to our gospel lesson, found in Mark 9, we encounter one who was a highly missional person.

Turning to Mark's gospel we look to the transfiguration of Jesus as another revelation of who and what Jesus Christ is. In verse two we see that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him. Peter, James, and John form the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. They will be the ones invited to go deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Jesus. Once on top of the mountain Jesus is transfigured – his appearance changes. In the next verse we read, *"his clothes became dazzling light"*. And then Jesus is joined by the two key figures in the Old Testament. There is great significance in who joins Jesus. Elijah and Moses join Jesus there on the mountaintop as Peter, James, and John look on. The scene is depicted in this painting by Titian from about 1560.



Moses represents the Law. The Law was what guided and defined the chosen people, the Jews. Moses was the accepted author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Moses was the one who led the people out of slavery and to the brink of the Promised Land. Moses had his share of mountaintop experiences. It was on top of Mount Sinai that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the origins of the Law that guided the people concerning how to live in right relationship with God and with one another.

The other character with Jesus and Moses was Elijah. Elijah was the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. Elijah spoke for and represented God – in the showdown with the prophets of Baal, in the drought that lasted three and a half years, in the encounter with the widow of Zarephath. Elijah too had his mountaintop experiences. It was Elijah who fled to the mountains to find space to mourn and lament. It was on the mountaintop that Elijah heard the still, small voice of God speaking direction into Elijah's life.



For believers, the spirits of Moses and Elijah returning to talk with Jesus establishes his place among the greats of the Jewish faith. In being able to converse with these two, Jesus is demonstrating a mastery over both the law and the prophetic tradition. As their conversation draws to a close, the clouds descend, and a voice from heaven speaks. God speaks, saying, "*This is my son, the beloved; listen to him*"! In the presence of Moses and Elijah, in the presence of Peter, James, and John, God declares Jesus connection to the father and places Jesus in the role of absolute authority. As suddenly as the moment began, it is over.

Peter, James, and John are once again left alone with Jesus. On the way back down the mountain Jesus instructs them to not tell anyone about the transfiguration until after he is resurrected. Perhaps the story would have interfered with what must take place. Just as it had for Moses and Elijah, the mountaintop brings clarity and purpose to the disciples. Knowing that Jesus was God's son, the beloved, the disciples could now begin to see what lay ahead for Jesus and for themselves. The mountaintop, as it was for these three disciples, is not a place we can stay forever. As much as Peter wanted to preserve the moment by building shelters or dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, it was not possible to extend the moment beyond its necessary time and space. Jesus and the disciples had to descend the mountain to tell the story, to report on all they had heard and seen with how they lived their lives. For Peter, James, and John, they descended from the mountaintop with a new clarity and purpose – to proclaim the divinity and power of Jesus, both as they ministered with him and as they carried on the story out into the world after Jesus ascended into heaven.

We are witnesses today to this mountaintop experience and to the revelation of who and what Jesus truly is. In the mountaintop experience we see that Jesus embodies both the Law and the prophets. What a creative story God tells on this mountaintop – revealing who God was and is throughout history and who God will be on into eternity. We are witnesses to God's creativity in how he revealed Jesus not just to the disciples but to us as well. And we continue to witness God's creative power in our lives as the Holy Spirit leads and guides and prompts us into actions big and small. Created in his image we bear Christ to the world, we are also called to be creative in how we descend the mountain to tell the stories of what Jesus has done for us.

Whether telling of the indwelling power of baptism or of the unmerited grace poured out in communion, whether telling of how God walked through the darkest days right by our side or remembering the beauty of the sunset that day on the beach that moved us to tears of joy, we are all called to tell the stories of why Jesus matters in our lives. To tell those stories, we must become people who practice these habits that will lead us to living those questionable lives. Living in mission will propel us out into the lives of others. The challenge for us today as we leave this place and go forth into the world is to be creative first in how we live and then in how we tell our stories of faith. May we recognize the opportunities this week and may the power of the Holy Spirit be at work in each of us. May this all be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider your “mountaintop” experiences (or your times in the “valley”), how have these led to spurts or growth in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. What personal faith habits could you dedicate more time to? How could this lead to being more missional? Pray for guidance and resolve!
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 9: 28-36. What stands out to you in Luke’s transfiguration story (compared to the original story from Mark 9)? How does comparing them add to your understanding of this event?

Video: Maybe We're Supposed to Run (2:12)

Quote to go with video: Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakens and knows it has to run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakens and knows it must outrun the swiftest gazelle or it will starve to death. The saying goes, " It matters not whether you're a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up, you'd better be ready to run!"