

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*Transfiguration of the Lord*  
Mark 9:2-9

### **Where Heaven Touches Earth**

I think I would have been terrified, too.

If I had been with Jesus on that mountain climbing expedition 2000 years ago, I think I would have been anxious all the way up the hill. After all, less than a week earlier Peter had guessed rightly when he told Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” And then Jesus had said some pretty frightening things in response to Peter, about suffering and rejection and being killed. Yes, we’d seen Jesus do some pretty amazing things, and the way he taught was unlike any other rabbi I’d ever heard. But this was a holy mountain, and scary things happen at the top of holy mountains.

If I had been one of Jesus’ disciples at the top of that mountain, and seen a blinding light and dead men walking, I’d have been terrified, too.

But the message of this strange and wonderful transfiguration story is a word that should calm all our fears and worries about life in this world—and for that matter, in the next world, too. It’s no wonder that this has been a central story in the life of the church through the ages, a favorite subject for Christian artists across centuries and cultures. We live in a fearful world, and these are anxious times. But this powerful, mystical vision has a message of hope for us all.

The symbolism and layers of meaning in this story are many. First, the setting. For the ancients, the closest an earthly creature could expect to come to God was on top of a mountain, in the mystery of the clouds. So when Jesus takes his friends on a hike up a mountain, anyone who knows the Bible’s stories knows that there’s a strong possibility of meeting God up there. It happened to Moses, and they all knew that story. On the mountaintop, God gave Moses the Law which would make the Hebrew people God’s people. It happened to Elijah, too—in a cave on the mountain, God confronted the depressed and despairing prophet in a “still, small voice,” or a “sound of sheer silence.” Going to the mountaintop is getting as close to heaven as you can while remaining on earth.

Then the action. Dazzling, shining light emanating from Jesus, whose robes become whiter than white. Light like this was not earthly, but divine. Then the appearance of Moses and Elijah, symbols of the Law and the Prophets, representatives of all that has gone before Jesus in the biblical story. Jesus must be the Messiah whom the Law and the Prophets point towards.

I imagine Peter whipping out his cell phone and saying, “Hey you guys, could you stand a little closer together? I’d like to get a picture of the three of you. Smile!” But when he looked again at the cell phone screen, I wonder what he’d see? Maybe just light, maybe nothing.

But since he didn’t have a cell phone, he suggested booths instead, I picture little shelters like you might see today in a cemetery protecting a statue of a saint, or of the Virgin Mary. The scripture tells us that his motivation was fear, making him suggest capturing this holy moment in a shrine. He was terrified and overwhelmed, so he resorted to the familiar—something concrete, something to keep them busy so they wouldn’t have to

dwell in the uncertainty and anxiety of the unknown and scary. Domesticate the holy; turn it into a religious ritual. In the face of divine majesty and awe, many of us would rather be busy.

But a voice confirms what they've seen, everything that points to Jesus as Messiah, the Christ. It speaks the same words as at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him." And then the whole scene fades, and everything returns to "normal."

There is no question that on that mountaintop, Peter, James and John were in the presence of the Holy. They were privileged witnesses to a truth that they could not yet understand, part of a story that would not be complete until Jesus had suffered and died and been resurrected. In this person, this human one, this man called Jesus, God was fully and completely present. In this human one, the veil dividing heaven and earth is stripped away, for in him, heaven and earth are one.

It is a strange story, for it speaks of the convergence of the physical world with the spiritual world, the earthly with the divine. It's not our everyday experience. But if we allow this story to speak its truth in our hearts and minds, we, like the disciples, will look at things differently ever after. And we'll see that the world is more than a material world. We'll see that a spiritual world interpenetrates the material, blessing and redeeming it.

Along with Orthodox Christians, the Celtic Christians of Ireland and Scotland and other places in Great Britain understood this better than most—that heaven and earth are not separate spheres, but rather are woven and interwoven together. Orthodox Christians depict this in their icons, which they understand to be windows into the Kingdom of Heaven. Gaze at an icon with devotion, and you will dwell in the kingdom of heaven on this earth. And in Celtic artwork, and carved on the high crosses, the characteristic pattern of interlocking knots is a symbol of the intertwined nature of heaven and earth. There is no divide between earth and heaven, just as it is impossible to divide Christ's human side from his divine side. The wonder and awe of the creation reveals the majesty and goodness of the Creator. Christ himself show this for, as a Christmas card once put it, "The world is a holy place. . .for the Holy has made it his home." (Quoted by Alison Vogel, "Bread of Life," *Weavings* xviii, no. 1, 39) A couple of weeks ago a 6-year-old offered me her definition of where heaven is when she said wisely, "I think it's an invisible place." For a 6-year-old, "invisible" is about the most mysterious word in the English language, because it says that something is real even though we can't see it. Heaven is an invisible place, real even though we can't see it. But in Jesus Christ, we can know heaven. And it's right here on earth.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Trappist monk Thomas Merton is quoted as saying this:

*Life is this simple.*

*We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent  
and God is shining through it all the time.*

*This is not just a fable or a nice story*

*It is true.*

*If we abandon ourselves to God*

*and forget ourselves,*

*we see it sometimes*

*and we see it maybe frequently.  
 God shows Godself everywhere,  
 In everything,  
 In people and in things and in nature and in events.  
 It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and  
 in everything and we cannot be without God.  
 It is impossible.  
 The only thing is that we don't see it.*

(Quoted by Esther de Waal, *Weavings* xvii, no. 4, p. 22)

The transfiguration is about the transformation of the disciples' sight as much as it is about a shining moment for Jesus. Now they could see the stunning reality of Jesus' identity. So it is an invitation to us, that our sight to be transformed as well, an invitation to see heaven touching earth and redeeming all creation, an invitation to see Jesus for who he really is: God, reconciling the world to Godself.

And giving to us the ministry of reconciliation. For a long time people have spoken of the Scottish island of Iona as a "thin place," a place where what separates heaven and earth is very thin. I can affirm that Iona is a place where it is easy to feel close to God. But across the sea, not too many miles from Iona, is another place where many people feel God's presence. It is the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, where Dan and I spent 3 months of our sabbatical as volunteers. And that may seem a paradox because Northern Ireland is a place where conflict has often been open and when not open, always under the surface. Heaven touches earth where human societies need deep healing. Down the road from Bozeman is a special place called Rockhaven, and I know that many of you here have felt the nearness of God there. It's in the name, after all—there's nothing more material than a rock, and "haven" is close enough to "heaven" for me. Earth and heaven joined. Our ministry at Rockhaven is about sharing this extraordinary place of God's presence with others, so that they will know the reality that in Christ, the spiritual and the material are one. What more powerful or precious gift could we offer to children than this experience, the opportunity to know God in Christ?

But you don't have to be outdoors in a place of great beauty to feel at one with God. Not at all! I think God just uses places like Iona and Corrymeela and Rockhaven to open our eyes to the wonder and beauty which are present all around us, and the sin and sorrow which cry out for redemption. After their mountaintop experience, Jesus took the disciples back down to the valley where immediately they were immersed in the arguments of a crowd. A boy was suffering in the grips of disease, interpreted as demonic spirit possession. The gift of the mountaintop experience was put to work; they needed Jesus to heal the boy. So he was healed.

It is in the everyday, the ordinary, the common life that the mountaintop experiences are tried and tested. We don't live on mountaintops, after all. We live with one another, in a fearful world, in an anxious time. When our relationships are colored more by our anxieties than by our faith, we need a dose of heaven on earth. We need God's grace to transform us, to transform our sight, to help us believe again that God is with us. In these anxious days, with a war that seems endless and financial realities that cast gloom over

rich and poor and middle class alike, we need to cultivate our attentiveness to the spiritual life so that we can believe again that God is here with us in every aspect of our life.

Merton says that the world is transparent and God is shining through it all the time. One more poet offers directions for seeing this divine blessing in the everyday. The poem is entitled, "How to Recognize Grace," by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre.

*It takes you by surprise  
 It comes in odd packages  
 It sometimes looks like loss  
 Or mistakes  
 It acts like rain  
 Or like a seed  
 It's both reliable and unpredictable  
 It's not what you were aiming at  
 Or what you thought you deserved  
 It supplies what you need  
 Not necessarily what you want  
 It grows you up  
 And lets you be a child  
 It reminds you you're not in control  
 And that not being in control  
     is a form of freedom.*

(*Weavings*, vol xvii, no 4, p. 28)

God bless us all with eyes to see Christ in all, and all in Christ. Amen.