

Transfiguration B 2024 Mark 9:2-9

A few years ago I got a ski pass for Blue Knob for the first time since high school. I skied near the other places where I've lived over the years, but we locals know that Blue Knob is the highest skiable mountain in PA. Where a lot of other resorts have more horizontal real estate, with shorter slopes side by side, Blue Knob has a narrow vertical footprint where everything converges to one point, with the chairlifts even sharing the same support pylons at the top. What that means in practice is that if you ride the chairlift that's on the far right side of the mountain, you will cross over the other chairlift. So there's the ground, and then there's clearance space, and then there's another chair lift, and then there's more clearance space, and then there's you—and that crossover happens right where the sign tells you to remove the safety bar. In the twenty-something years since I'd been there, I had forgotten how high up that is. It's terrifying. The view is incredible—you can see for miles—but you can't look for that long, lest you forget that you're about to come to the end of the ride. The terrifying heights and incredible views are part of the overall experience, but you're not really doing the sport until you get your feet, or your skis, back on the ground.

We meet Jesus on the mountaintop each year at the Transfiguration, the turning point between the season after Epiphany, that is, the season of revelation, and the season of Lent, when we follow Jesus' journey to the cross. The Transfiguration itself is another revelation: Jesus appears in dazzling glory with Moses, the representative of Israel who received God's law, and Elijah, God's exemplary prophet. Peter, James, and John, Jesus' inner circle, witness Jesus in conversation with these two pillars of the faith. Peter gets a bad rap in this scene for being terrified and not knowing what to say. But we, too, might be terrified to see a glowing Jesus in conversation with two very important but very ancient figures.

I'm not sure what Mark thought the right thing would have been for Peter to say in that moment, but in fact, Peter's response shows that he knows more than we might think. However terrified he was, Peter states that it's good for them to be there, recognizing that God, who throughout scripture meets people on mountains, is present among them. Peter also knows who Jesus is talking to, since he names them. And his offer to make three dwelling places is logical: in the past, when Moses and Elijah encountered God on mountains, they stayed up there for 40 days and 40 nights. I'd want some shelter, too. The fact that Peter wants to build a place for Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah suggests that Peter has figured out that Jesus is more than just a good teacher who can exorcise demons. But Peter learns a little bit more.

The voice from heaven identifies Jesus: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!* Echoing the same words as those spoken at Jesus' baptism, this time God the Father speaks not directly to Jesus but to those who are following him, teaching them that Jesus is more than just a leader like Moses or a prophet like Elijah; as God's Son, Jesus speaks for God—hence the instruction to listen to him, and his actions reveal God's will and way. Although God was never restricted by location, the people better understood God to be present in these mountaintop revelations. What Peter, James, and John learn at the Transfiguration is that they will never be separated from the divine presence so long as Jesus, the Beloved Son, is with them. Although it's good for them to be up on that mountain, they don't need to stay there in order to remain in the presence of God.

This is not the last mountain that Jesus and the disciples will encounter. They will see Jesus lifted up on the cross on Mount Calvary. They will see Jesus ascend to heaven from the Mount of Olives. Before that happens, they will follow Jesus through much more ordinary circumstances—no apparitions of famous dead guys, no dazzling appearance, no narration from a heavenly voice. But even their ordinary, every day work is holy, because they'll be doing it with and through and because of Jesus. Peter was right that it was good for them to be up on the mountain—but not because of the brilliant, terrifying show, not because they got to see Moses and Elijah, not even because they got to hear the heavenly voice—but it was good for them to be there, because Jesus was there. And since Jesus goes down the mountain, it's good for them to be there, too.

Stories like these have given us the idiom of “mountain top” experiences, those intensely spiritual or emotionally charged times when we are better able to discern God's loving presence or are gifted with clarity that we don't usually possess. We sometimes talk about those mountaintop moments charging us up for the more mundane valleys we have to trek until we reach another peak. Sunday worship, a moving musical performance, a week at church camp, a retreat or convention, or whatever makes it easier for us to perceive God's presence—those are good places for us to be. But we're not meant to stay there. Those are not the places we find God; those are the places where we better remember that God has found us and remains with us, always. From those mountaintop lookouts, where we can see the big picture, we return to a hurting world that badly needs the love, grace, mercy, and justice that build God's kingdom. Confident that God is with us, may we get our feet on the ground and go where we are called.