

## Yes You Can!

### Mark 9:2-9

A good New Testament interpreter will not even try to explain the transfiguration of Jesus. It is best simply to take the story as presented. This incident in the life of Jesus remains cloaked in mystery. What actually happened to Jesus on the mountaintop we cannot say; but we know that on the disciples who were there the transfiguration had a profound effect.

According to Mark, it was six days after Simon's confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus took Peter, James, and John—the so-called “inner circle of disciples—apart for prayer and instruction. Very likely they retreated to one of the lonely ridges of Mount Hermon in the northern part of Palestine, the highest mountain in the region. There one of the strangest events in the gospels took place.

The transfiguration story has three elements that go completely beyond rational explanation. The first was the transformation that Jesus experienced. It was as if some inner radiance became visible. Mark says that Jesus' garments became dazzling white, as though super-bleached. In his version Matthew writes that Jesus' “face shone like the sun, and his clothes became a brilliant white” (17:2). Luke's source has it that “the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening” (9:29).

All three gospel writers resort to apocalyptic language to describe the event. The brightness of Jesus' clothing and the descent of the enveloping cloud about which they tell are typical Biblical references to God and his glory. The disciples were familiar with those signs. They would have immediately associated them with a revelation from God.

The second thing to notice is this account is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Mark says that they were talking with Jesus. Moses and Elijah were symbols of

Jewish identity and hope. Moses was the deliverer and law-giver. He represented the foundation of the nation. Elijah was the first and greatest of the prophets. He was the conscience of the people. Both Moses and Elijah were associated with Messianic expectations. They also shared another distinction. Jewish tradition held that since Moses' burial site was unknown (The record said that Moses died on Mt. Nebo alone with God and that God buried him.) and since Elijah had been taken up into the heavens from a chariot, both had not undergone physical death and were alive in heaven. Given the images around them and the concepts of their traditions, the disciples felt that they had been given a glimpse of the heavenly realm.

Third, there came a voice from a cloud (a vehicle of the deity). The voice said, "This is my beloved Son: listen to him." It's as if the voice was telling the disciples to put things together, to experience the mystery but also to allow life to be directed by it. Then, suddenly, it was over. There was no light, no voice, no Moses and Elijah. There was only a mysterious memory.

What did the disciples make of this experience? There is an allusion to the transfiguration in the Second Letter of Peter and references to the light and the voice in other mystical accounts in the documents that make up the New Testament. Those who referred to this event or to others similar to it never tried to explain anything. They allowed the mystical to become a part of their faith system and a kind of affirmation of their relationship with Christ.

Maybe that should be our approach as well. Mystery is a part of our faith. We need encounters that beckon us to move beyond the familiar. My personal religious quest is motivated by two basic needs—a need for deliverance and a need for reassurance. I feel a need for deliverance from sin, from fear, from a life of emptiness and uncertainty, and from loneliness and insecurity. I feel a need for reassurance that I am loved, that life has purpose, that my efforts to live by certain moral standards are not wasted, and that the guiding, gracious hand of God can lead me through whatever challenges and difficulties life might bring.

My preaching is based on the notion that you have similar needs. Sometimes, usually in a manner completely unplanned, these needs are met. Occasionally they are met in a way that is almost overwhelming. You know what I mean. There is inspiration or insight, a deep consciousness of the presence of God, and a feeling of deliverance from all that is wrong and a reassurance of all that is right. Soren Kierkegaard called this kind of experience the Moment (capital M). Rudolf Otto referred to it as “a consciousness of the Holy.” Most of us, thinking of the transfiguration, call it a “mountaintop experience.”

I sincerely hope that you can remember such times, for they are determinative for life. They give life its vitality; they shape its direction; they set our level of devotion. Those times around a campfire at a youth retreat, those times of dedication during a revival or service of spiritual renewal, those feelings stirred by a piece of music or passage of scripture, those sensations of awe during personal or group worship—those are times when we feel close to God, when we feel deliverance and reassurance. Don't try to explain them. Let them become a part of who you are.

It's the mountaintop experience—felt here and there in our religious life—that gives meaning and strength for all the other days. Profound worship gives value to daily life. It conveys strength for routine activities and for the hard places of life. Close encounters with God tell us that we can become the kind of persons we need to be. If I may alter a phrase that became common in the recent presidential election, I would say that mountaintop experiences, even if they are rare, tell us, “Yes you can!”

There are several aspects of the transfiguration story that I find extremely helpful in my own pilgrimage. One is that even ordinary people such as you and I can take part in the mysterious and the spiritual. There was nothing special about the men who were with Jesus that day. Simon Peter had just made his statement about Jesus as “God's chosen,” but he had also disagreed with Jesus about the difficulties Jesus was facing and Jesus had called him “Satan.” James and John, as soon as they came down

from the mountain, argued about places of honor and leadership in Jesus' kingdom. This was not a distinguished group of men.

However, it is to such persons that Jesus gives enlightenment. We are able, if we are open to God's Spirit, to make astounding discoveries. What is needed is a sense of expectancy. Most of the time we really don't expect a great deal from our experiences with God. We worship or pray hoping to feel enough of God's presence or grace to get by. Maybe that's all we want. The transfiguration story tells us that there can be so much more.

Annie Dillard, in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, wrote: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews! For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return."

I am struck by the abrupt ending to the phenomenon on the mountaintop. It's as if a hypnotist snapped his fingers and the whole thing was over. The descent from the mountain was a quiet one. Jesus told the disciples to say nothing about what they had seen and heard. The warning might have been unnecessary. The disciples were probably confused. But something had happened to them and they would never be the same. However, they found reassurance with every recollection of the experience.

And it prepared them for the work before them in the valley. There is always the valley where we spend our days and where we live out the hopes developed on the mountain. What we come to know on the mountain enables us to live and work in the valley. We learn that we can do the works of our Lord. And he expects us to do so.

Tony Campolo is a passionate believer in missions. He has organized and promoted missions in numerous places in the US and abroad. Once Campolo was to speak to a missionary group. About 300 people were present. During the business session the president read a letter from a missionary appealing for \$4000 for an immediate need. After reading the letter, the president said, "I'm going to ask our guest speaker, Mr. Campolo, to lead us in prayer that God will supply this need. Brother Campolo, will you pray?"

Campolo said, "No." The president was stunned. "No," Campolo added. "I won't pray to God to meet the needs of this missionary. I'll tell you what I will do. I'll take every bit of cash I have in my pockets and place it on the table. I'm asking each of you to do the same. If we don't get \$4000, I'll pray to God to meet the need." The president smiled and said, "You have a point." But Campolo persisted, "I'm not trying to make a point. I challenge everyone here to give the cash he has. No credit cards. No checks." He emptied his pockets. Others came forward. In minutes there was more than \$4000 on the table. When he began his message, Campolo said, "We don't need to pray that God will provide resources. He already has. We need to pray that we will let them go."

That's what Jesus expects of those who have been on the mountaintop with him. In ways that we can never understand, much less explain, we have been touched with deliverance and reassurance. And we are enabled. We can be who and what Christ needs in our world. Yes we can!

J. William Harris

22 February 2009