

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, February 14, 2021

SURPRISED ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Transfiguration of the Lord

Mark 9:2-9

Some experiences are never really planned; they just happen, and when they do, we are grateful. The disciples needed some time on the mountain. It was quite a shock when Jesus spoke plainly about what lay ahead. This wasn't time for cute parables or riddles. He told them He would, "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days, rise again." The disciples were both shocked and confused. This wasn't what they thought would happen, the day they decided to drop everything, to follow Jesus. When Jesus called His inner circle, His closest friends, Peter, James, and John, to go with Him up the mountain, they were ready to go. Perhaps in the rarefied air their minds would clear.

There was no way the disciples could have prepared for that mountain. They saw a sudden change come over Jesus. He appeared in brilliant light. As Mark tells it, "His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." The disciples knew Jesus was special, but they had never experienced anything like this. Jesus was transfigured right in front of them.

As if this weren't enough, they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses gave people the Ten commandments, and led them to the Promised Land. Elijah was the first prophet, and taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. The Jewish people believed Elijah would return in the same way he departed, on a chariot. These two men represented the Law and Prophets, the sources of authority in Jewish life.

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN GOD SUDDENLY BREAKS INTO OUR LIVES. The confused disciples were given a preview of what was to come. They were given a glimpse of the future. At that very special moment, they saw an amazing sight, a combination of heaven and earth, time and eternity. All Peter could say was,

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here!” Such mountaintop experiences are rare, but they do happen.

William Boggs’ grandfather played a very important role in his life. Grandpa Boggs had been blind for nearly twenty years. Grandpa would tell you quicky the way the world was going, he didn’t much care to see if anyway. He did have one regret however. He had never seen his grandson.

Sensing death closing in on him, William’s grandfather began praying more intensely for the Lord to give him sight, just long enough to see his grandson before he died. The doctors had told him that it was an impossibility because his eyes had long since turned milky blue from a disease.

One day, Grandpa was playing with his grandson, when suddenly he could see. The whole family ran out into the yard to see what all the fuss was, and quickly grew quiet, as it became apparent that his vision had returned. Grandpa picked up his grandson, whom he had never seen, and stared at him with an intensity that frightened the child. William remembers holding his face between his small hands, while both of them cried. Then Grandpa saw something in William. Grandpa looked his grandson in the eyes, and softly said, “a preacher.” That was all he said. Just those two words, so quietly uttered, with a tone of surprise. Thirty years later, William wonders which was the greater miracle—that he could see, or that he could see something so deeply hidden in William, and Williams’ distant future. God breaks into our lives suddenly, and distinctly. AT SUCH TIMES, OUR PERSPECTIVE IS CHANGED.

The disciples were actually there—with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Peter never at a loss for words, approaches the Master and blurts out, “Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” It was an awesome moment. Peter was both frightened, and inspired by what he saw.

No sooner had Peter spoken those words than Moses and Elijah disappeared. One moment Jesus was talking with them, and the very next they were gone. Now they were alone with Jesus. Then a cloud appeared. The Jewish people associated God with a cloud, remembering how God led the ancient Israelites in a cloud through the desert. The voice of God thundered from the cloud, “This is My son, the Beloved; listen to Him.”

At that moment, Peter heard what he did not want to hear, “Listen to Him.” Peter had rebuked Jesus when Jesus had spoken of His suffering and death. But now God was saying, “Listen to Him.” Peter didn’t want to listen—not to news of Christ’s death. This was an awful truth he did not want to confront, but knew he must. There are some truths that mean change.

Have you ever been confronted with a message that changed your perspective? One church chose its Lenten theme, “Forty Days of Love.” Each week, members of the congregation were encouraged to show their love and appreciation in different ways. The first week they were encouraged to send notes to people who had made positive contributions to their lives.

After the first service, a man in the congregation wanted to speak to his pastor. The pastor describes the man as “kind of macho, a former football player who loved to hunt and fish, a strong self-made man.” The man told his pastor, “I love you, and I love this church, but I’m not going to participate in this Forty Days of Love stuff. It’s okay for some folks,” he said, “but it’s a little too sentimental and syrupy for me.”

A week went by. The next Sunday, this man waited after church to see his pastor again. “I want to apologize for what I said last Sunday,” he told him, “about the Forty Days of Love. I realized on Wednesday that I was wrong.”

“Wednesday?” his pastor repeated. “What happened on Wednesday?”

“I got one of those letters!” the man said. The letter came as a total surprise. It was from a person the man never expected to hear from. It touched him so deeply, he now carries it around in his pocket all the time. “Every time I read it,” he said, “I get tears in my eyes.” It was a transforming moment in this man’s life. Suddenly, he realized he was loved by others in the church. This changed his entire outlook. “I was so moved by that letter” he said, “I sat down, and wrote ten letters myself.”

Receiving that letter was a transforming experience for Mr. Macho. It came from a mailbox, rather than a mountaintop, but the effect was the same—his perspective was changed. God breaks into our lives, and we are changed.

This brings us to the last thing to say. MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES PREPARE US FOR LIFE IN THE VALLEYS. The time came for Jesus and His three disciples to

come down the mountain. As Peter, James, and John descended the mountain, they pondered the significance of what they had just experienced. My guess is they walked back down in silence—instructed them not to tell anyone of their experience, “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

The time would come when they would tell everyone, but the time wasn't right yet. Jesus and the disciples still had work to do. Jesus needed the disciples' help. This mountaintop experience played a major role in these three disciples. However brief the experience was, they were given a glimpse of the future. Those who have seen the future are better prepared to live in the present.

“And Jesus was transfigured before them...” What a difference that made to the three disciples who witnessed the event, and what a difference that can make for us. God breaks into our lives sometimes. When it happens, our perspective on life is changed. Such occurrences prepare us for life in the valley. Such experiences tell us that whatever the situation, we are not alone.

AMEN.

“S.D.G.”