

**Mark 9: 1-8**  
**February 11, 2018**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**

The Gospel lesson appointed for today omits verse one: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

The scholars who put the calendar of readings together have made a decision. That verse one belongs with teachings that go before it. They are not wrong. But what they miss is the fact that verse one mediates what goes before and what is to come. In this case, Jesus’ promise about the imminence of the coming kingdom of God relates both to the coming of the son of Man which goes before and to the event of the Transfiguration.

Some scholars explain the Transfiguration as a wandering story of Jesus’ resurrection which found its way to the middle of the Gospel narrative. Maybe so. The fact is, however, that the story *is placed where it is*. We are meant to listen and reflect upon it in the episode’s setting within the Gospel narrative. We are meant to hear Jesus speak of his coming crucifixion and resurrection. We are meant to hear his warning about keeping the faith in the time between his resurrection and his coming again. Hence the appropriateness of understanding the promise that some *standing here* will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God come in power. It is clear that Jesus believes that he will return soon and the disciples must hold fast.

But what happens when verse one looks forward to the story of the Transfiguration?

And he said to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power.” Six days later he took with him Peter, James and John up a high mountain apart from themselves. And he was transfigured before them.

How do you hear verse one now? It sounds like the immediate enactment of Jesus' promise! Jesus is clothed in blinding white light. Moses and Elijah appear as witnesses to Jesus as the fulfillment of the messianic hope of Israel. Surely we may understand that the three disciples are receiving a front row seat to the kingdom of God coming in power.

I trust the truth of this event because the response of the disciples is so real. They are *terrified*. Their human understanding of Jesus has been blasted away. They are in a complete state of disorientation. Their response to this overwhelming spiritual experience is *of course* to *do something*. They must try to manage this uncontrollable outbreak of sacred chaos. It is what humans do in the face of the utter loss of all that is familiar. We try to shape it and somehow tame it back into the realm of our experience. Death, divorce, abuse, being a victim of crime, debilitating injury—all these and many more are times which threaten, and sometimes do, overwhelm us. I understand from MJ that the book which will be talked about at the women's retreat is about the attempt to deal with the disorientation of catastrophic tragedy. The colorful title describes in earthy terms the process of moving forward in the midst of confusion and grief, anger and yes, terror. The first word of the title is "figuring" the last word is "out." In the face of acute and sudden disorientation it is what humans try to do.

In light of this, I wonder if the story of the Transfiguration is really as remote as it seems. Would we be able to recast our understanding of the phrase "mountaintop experience" to include, not just moments of transcendent ecstasy but also times of great loss and tragedy?

Jesus never said that the coming of the kingdom of God would be the arrival of bliss. He consistently presented the breaking in of God's realm as a time of redemption. People will be released from the chains of suffering and sin; but release is not always happy. There as many

losses as there are gains when redemption happens. I remember leading a worship service in a maximum security prison in Connecticut. There was a prayer request “for Joe who has been here for twenty years and is being released tomorrow. He is terrified.”

Redemption means the loss of security and the entry to a new realm of life. It represents the loss of a life we know and the beginning of a life that is unknown—a life with no maps. It is a wilderness journey much like the Israelites took from slavery in Egypt. How often did they complain about the journey and wish they could go back. How often did they romanticize the brutal life they left and see nothing but danger and destruction ahead?

There on the mountain of Transfiguration the three disciples got a glimpse of that redemption and it terrified them. And yet, here was a *fulfillment* of Jesus’ promise that “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power.” Well, Peter, James and John, here it is.

Truthfully, I would just as soon be spared being selected for this honor. I do not like being terrified. I do not want my harmonious world blown away in a moment by a phone call or a doctor’s diagnosis. Indeed, perhaps like you, I spend a lot of energy avoiding anything and anyone who even remotely stirs that fear in me. To live this way is to be emotionally and spiritually isolated from God and the redemption he offers in Christ. I will seek to be secure in this life and take my chances in the next. But what a high cost we pay when we do this! Our lives become defined by what Albert Ellis called “the terrible fear of the *“what if?”*”

Yet when the worst thing that could possibly happen *happens*, we discover a depth of strength we never knew we had. We survive. We find that there is life on the other side of the tragedy. We are delivered from a life lived in fear. We are liberated to live life unafraid to

explore. We embrace our fears and commit them to the grace and mercy of God. We find ourselves doing things we would have avoided like the plague and spending time with people who were strange and even threatening to us.

In short when we have *this* sort of mountaintop experience, when we see Jesus in his fullness and we begin the journey seeking a new understanding of our lives I believe we can say that Jesus' promise has happened to us. We are still alive *and we have seen the kingdom of God come with power. Amen.*