

Epiphany Transfiguration B  
Peace, Seattle  
February 11, 2018  
Mark 9:2-9

## **EXQUISITE LIGHT**

Last summer, on our family road trip to Minnesota and back, we had several opportunities to be in mountain country. While in Montana we hiked the Danny-On trail up Big Mountain, a regular ritual during Kindem family reunions.

Some years, smoke from wildfires can obscure the view from Big Mountain's summit, but this year things were calm and incredibly clear.

From the top of the mountain looking South we saw the Flathead Valley stretching out for dozens of miles, hemmed in on its eastern flank by the Mission Range and on its west by the Salish Mountains. Looking East from the summit the high, jutting peaks of Glacier Park dominated the skyline. While to the North the ridges of the Whitefish Range drew our eyes toward the Canadian border and beyond.

There are ways other than hiking that can get to the top of Big Mountain—you can buy your way up on a chairlift— but trekking for 3½ to 4 hours up the trail through meadows of blooming bluebells, paintbrush, and bear grass, is much more satisfying. And for younger ones it's a badge of honor that makes the tram ride down that much more rewarding.

The last ¾ mile, the Danny-On trail grows noticeably steeper. Switchbacks have you weaving this way and that, while a more direct route to the top by way of service roads tempts tired hikers with what appears to be a swifter option for reaching the top.

But looks are deceiving in the mountains. And experience has taught us that the more direct routes, while tantalizing, are much more taxing in the end.

Mark doesn't tell us how long it took Jesus and his climbing party to reach the summit in today's story, but he makes a point of telling us that it was no small mountain. It was a high mountain, and a place off the beaten path.

The story tells us their climb culminates with brilliant light as a transfigured Jesus holds council with Moses and Elijah while Peter, James and John scratch their heads, trying to make sense of it all. Then comes the cloud, and the Voice—THIS IS MY BELOVED SON—LISTEN TO HIM!

The opening words of our reading remind us that this episode was preceded by another important event. Six days earlier on a different mountain, Jesus had asked his companions who they thought he might be. Peter had answered, YOU ARE THE MESSIAH! But when Jesus started parsing what being Messiah would mean for him—suffering, rejection, death—Peter would have none of it.

Neither he nor the other disciples had the spiritual bandwidth to imagine that suffering and Messiah could go together.

Now on this mountaintop, six days later, we can almost see the thought bubble above Peter's head as he watches Jesus with Moses and Elijah bathed in glory: Now THIS is what I'm talking about!

**But before Peter and the others can even set up camp, the glory is gone.** And Jesus, true to form, is back to his incomprehensible ways. TELL NO ONE ANYTHING, he commands them, UNTIL THE SON OF MAN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

Some experiences are more challenging than others to put into words—and this seems especially true when numinous moments break into ordinary time and we find ourselves awestruck, disoriented, or overwhelmed—which is what happened to Peter, Andrew, James and John that day.

These experiences are often fleeting, and leave us wondering whether what we experienced really happened, or if it wasn't some sort of illusion.

**In his book, Convictions**, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg—perhaps best known for writings that challenge traditional ways of understanding the Christian faith—shares a mystical experience he had later in life while flying on a plane from Tel Aviv to New York.<sup>1</sup>

The experience, he recounts, was the longest and most intense experience of this kind in his life. Suddenly, the light in the plane changed and became golden, and everything was filled with exquisite beauty. Under the influence of this spiritual moment Borg saw that everyone looked wondrous—why, even the man pacing the aisle whom Borg had avoided looking at throughout the flight because he was perhaps the ugliest man Borg had ever seen—even HE was transformed in that golden light.

Last week we went to hear the St. Olaf Choir at Benaroya Hall. Woven throughout the program were texts and music which knit the same golden light and sublime conviction into a seamless whole. The result, for me, was an experience of both exquisite beauty and deep resonance and none more so than with the setting of William Blake's poem, Can I see Another's Woe?<sup>2</sup> LISTEN TO THE WORDS:

*Can I see another's woe, and not be in sorrow too?*

*Can I see another's grief, and not seek for kind relief?*

*Can I see a falling tear, and not feel my sorrow's share?*

*Can a father see his child weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?*

*Can a mother sit and hear an infant groan an infant fear?*

*No, No! never can it be! Never, never can it be!*

*And can he who smiles on all hear the wren with sorrows small,  
Hear the small bird's grief and care, hear the woes that infants bear,*

*And not sit beside the nest, pouring pity in their breast;  
And not sit the cradle near, weeping tear on infant's tear;*

*And not sit both night and day, wiping all our tears away?  
O, no! never can it Be! Never, never can it be!*

*He doth give his joy to all; he becomes an infant small;  
He becomes a man of woe;' he doth feel the sorrow too.*

*Think not though canst sigh a sigh and thy maker is not by;  
Think not thou canst weep a tear and thy maker is not near.*

*O! he gives to us his joy that our grief he may destroy;  
Till our grief is fled and gone he doth sit by us and moan.*

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> The piece mingles Blake's poem with melodies written by J. S. Bach and Martin Luther, in a setting by John Muehleisen.

**The God whose glory we glimpse shining on that mountain in Jesus' face rightly evokes our songs of praise. Yet who he truly is cannot be fully known until he becomes a man of woe.**

In a recent article, [Craig Barnes](#) tells how when he was a young boy in Sunday school, his teacher, Mrs. Williams, told Bible stories using a flannelgraph.<sup>3</sup> Some of you here are old enough to remember that technology!

She would place cut out characters on the flannel board when she got to their part of the drama, but the problem was, the characters had to be pressed hard onto that field of flannel in order to stay where she wanted them to. And after years of generous use, and after incidents like spilled Kool-Aid, tugs-of-war between classmates, and the general ravages of time, some of these figures had odd wrinkles, discolorations, rips and tears, and had to be taped together in order to remain useable.

“While it may not have been her intent,” Barnes writes, “Mrs. Williams was proclaiming a holy mystery to her third-graders: God is not easy on the people who are used in the biblical drama.

“When we look at most of the leading characters in scripture, it’s clear that by the end of their life they’re all stained and taped together. But none of them seem to have any regrets about their hard lives...their lives are stained and torn by grief, failure, and the high cost of saying yes to their calling... But along the way their prayers are mostly that they will still be used in the holy drama.”<sup>4</sup>

The Christ whose glory we glimpse on the mountain, our LIGHT-infused Lord, who blesses us and all creation with unfathomable grace; not only rightly evokes our songs of GLORY and PRAISE; he beckons us to move beyond petty arguments and turf mongering to a place where forgiveness and community reign; to wade in the waters of that mysterious, wondrous light which illumines the Other whom we encounter across the table, across the aisle, across the street, and within our own divided selves; a light which reveals all to be filled with exquisite beauty despite our flaws.

Beneath all the surface issues which dominate our days, our agendas, and our conflicts is an abiding light and pulsing heart that, calling us through baptismal waters, names us, too, BELOVED! And carries us into community with all living things.

EVA VICTORIA, whom we baptize today, may not remember that the day she came to the font was the day that mysterious light shown in the face of Christ on the mountain.

So our jobs as her lovers, her home community, her familia, is to remind her that his light resides in her, and that no matter what life may hold, Christ will be her companion through joy and woe and exquisite beauty.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *A Weighty Soul*. In *Christian Century*, January 31, 2018, page 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.