

The Summit Meeting

Mark 9:2-9

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, February 26, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us continue in prayer: Now in the majesty of this moment, Lord Jesus, may your word come clear to us. May your Spirit speak to our hearts and our minds, and change us. Form us to be in your mission and your stature. May you lead us into your kingdom, forever, as we now hear your Word. Amen.

It is the business of God to change peoples' lives. It is the action of the Holy Spirit to transform the church in history. You know there are transformational things happening in the church when a good Scots tradition church – a good Presbyterian church – has worship leadership named Winsheimer, Weimer, and Icenogle! God transforms the church. That transformation takes place in a somewhat predictable way in the Gospel – it's an undulating motion of valleys and mountains. Our church will be more and more transformed as a global presence and a global identity as the years go by. This is God's intent: that we would see in a high place, the future where God is leading us, so that we will, in fact, go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. And all those nations shall come here, participate in worship, and make more disciples.

We love high places. We love those moments when, in those special wondrous high places, God pours out warm and nurturing experiences for us. From 1949 to 1961, the first twelve years of my life, my family would take regular trips out of the Los Angeles basin, venture through the mountains above Los Angeles, and go up into the high desert of Mojave and to the higher mountains of the Tehachapi Pass. We looked forward to those trips in my Dad's Cadillac limousine. My Dad loved to drive Cadillacs, and the limousine was the smallest version of a car that would handle all of us as nine people in the car. We would ride into the Tehachapi Pass going up into the foothills of the highest mountain, and we would get to this wonderful stretch of highway that would literally 'roll' with the mountains. I can never forget the feeling of coming out of that first deep place and going over that first high rise, and my Dad would always gun the car a little bit. The car would almost take off from the ground. There's that wonderful moment of queasiness when you reach the top of the summit and you're just airless for a little while.

When we get to the top of the summit it feels really good. We look forward to those moments. We look forward to the moments of high places where God shows up in special ways. That oscillation of life is part of what Jesus leads the disciples to experience. The time of transfiguration – that mountain of transfiguration – is the highest point in the Gospel geographically. The disciples have started out in a lower place and have gone up into the mountains where Jesus has preached to them and taught them. They have risen to the highest places in Cesaerea Philippi and that Mount of Transfiguration at the top part of the nation of Israel – the northern summit. It is there, in between Jesus' predictions of his death, that the three disciples (Peter, James and John) experience the wonder of Jesus' transfiguration.

Our church year is built that way. Today, the Sunday of Transfiguration, which follows Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, is a time when we grow as disciples. This time of year is called the "ordinary." And it brings us to the high place of the gospel – the transfiguration moment. From there, you may think, "Well, we're ready to go to heaven." But that's not what happens. On Tuesday, we celebrate that time of fatness and wonder God has given all good things, then we immediately go into Ash Wednesday, where we spend 40 days in Lent letting go of things we love. Transfiguration always leads to a time of humility and letting go.

There is a frustration that exists in the world that leads the disciples to the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is going from village to village, and town to town, and he is healing people. He's casting out demons; he's making life better. Life for them, as poor people, is pretty miserable. That frustration is deeply tied to our humanity, our penchant for evil and doing the wrong thing. We hunger, on the road following Jesus, for a better life; for a life that is more glorious and fulfilling. And we believe that Jesus will lead us to that place.

Regularly in our world today, we have summit meetings. In July 2005 the G8 Summit met to talk about the future of Africa – one of the most frustrating environments on the face of the earth; so many difficult things going on there. They gathered to commit themselves to providing peace-keeping forces, to support democracy, transparency... to fight corruption, to get rid of disease, to stimulate economic growth... all things that are Gospel-based commitments. Those summit glimpses of the power of what can happen on the face of the earth when people get together with the right motivation and want to make the earth a better place: this is the kind of expectation the disciples had when they went up on that mountain with Jesus. You see, Jesus had called out the three from the twelve; and they had to feel like something special was about ready to happen. Jesus doesn't go up on mountains without a distinct purpose.

On that mountain, there is this wonderful, inspiring moment when the word of God is made very clear... when Jesus is clearly seen as the one who brings the Law and the Prophets together. The time of Moses and the time of Elijah are all wrapped up in the glory of Jesus. That apocalyptic, eschatological, revelatory moment we all hunger for. Oh, that we would be able to experience those mountaintop moments when God shows up and there's wonder everywhere! We develop, on that mountaintop, a panoramic view of the entire world and the future. We can see the past, and we can see the possibilities of where God is leading us. We're lifted above the ordinariness of life: the intensity, the demand, the issues that haunt us; and we're put into a place where we can see high and long. We reflect upon the past, prepare for the future, and sustain in the presence; we realize, in that inspired time, that God can change things. And we can be a part of it.

I meet annually in a national Presbyterian pastors covenant group. Many of us have noted on many occasions that this group is our "summit meeting" on an annual basis – where we get glimpses of what heaven could be like. And one of the most important glimpses is just sheer laughter. Do you have summit meetings where you get together and just laugh, for the sheer joy of it? My sense is that summit experience is full of the most terrorizing expectations and hopes, and the most humorous ones.

We were wrestling with our future in this National Covenant Group, and some people said, "You know, we're all getting a lot older here. I think maybe it's time to disband the group because I hate to be in a group where the last person turns out the lights." And my response is, "that's exactly the kind of group I'd like to be in." I want to be here where, one-by-one, we celebrate each other going to heaven and one-by-one, we receive each other into heaven, and we are here to see the summit moments of what God wants to call us into, in this life and the next.

Are you in such a group, where you have regular experiences of the glory of God? My guess is that's why many of us come to worship here at National Presbyterian Church: to experience the 'summit moments' of the glory of God. There's anticipation in this summit moment, for the future. It's a recognition that we cannot live in the past, but we must be driven into the future of what God's perspective and vision for that future is.

The earth will be transfigured in the future. Heaven will come down to Earth; Earth is transfigured by heaven. The summit reveals that God has prepared a wonderful future for us; this is not all there is. C.S. Lewis, in his little allegory, *The Great Divorce*, talks about going to heaven and being on a great plain of grass, and looking up into mountains that are so tall, and steep, and full of grandeur. They are inaccessible summits; a height so enormous that "my waking sight could not have taken in such a tremendous object. With light brooding over the top of it, as if dawn was coming, the summits beckon the saints of God into the future." It's a promise that the sunrise is coming.

But this is a preparation for mission. We are invited up to those high places, not so that we can just live there in the glory of it all, and sit there and absorb it. But we are called to go from there into the world, and into mission. We are invited to see the possibility of ministry in the future. And we cannot stay on the mountain; we must go down from that place. We must leave here and we must go into Lent. We must face Ash Wednesday and the coming passion of Jesus. And we must go to the cross with Jesus. The disciples knew that because Jesus had taught them about his coming death.

Recently, at an officer retreat of about 200 leaders of our church, we focused on this movement of

discipleship of Jesus. And there was in the room a sense of awe and expectation that we could live into the mission of Jesus, of making disciples here in Washington, DC, and into the future, and around the world. As we follow Jesus' disciples, we can be led to make disciples. We are passionate about Christ's mission in the world. And so we believe that we can do that mission – but that mission is down the mountain. It's among the people. It's in the hard places and the valleys.

There are some temptations for us to deal with when we're up there on that mountain. One of the temptations is that we simply want to stay there – we don't want to go. Peter says to Jesus: "Well, this is a wonderful place, Lord. It's good for us to be here; let's build three tents for you and Elijah and Moses, and let's hang out here." Remember those moments in your life when things were so good and so high that you simply said, "Lord, may this be the way that things stay. I don't want to leave here?" I think sometimes in our experience of the church, we have those moments when there's a wonderful high time, and we simply don't want to lose those moments. We want to hold onto them forever. But Jesus says, we must go down the mountain in order to do mission.

It is time for us to give up the temptation and go. We want to stay on the mountain because we don't want to lose the glory of the moment. We want to rest here in the splendor of the presence of God. But sometimes we delude ourselves that these moments are creating us to be special and elite people. "Well, Jesus took US up the mountain; he didn't take YOU up the mountain," Peter, James, and John probably thought, with the rest of the disciples. And you know how the other disciples sensed and experienced that, because when they went down from the mountain and they were trying to cast out demons, they failed. And Jesus came down to say to the nine, "How long do I have to work with you perverse people?" That didn't help their sense of esteem. Sometimes there can be that feeling that 'we have this special experience. We deserve the glory.' We continue to live life in the heavens even though our feet need to be on the ground; we are so heavenly-minded, we are no earthly good.

A third temptation is that, when we go down the mountain, somehow we think, because we've had this powerful experience, that life is going to get better and better. We're going to do more and more miracles and magnificent things... because Jesus is with us. It's down the mountain that the disciples discover that they can't do much of anything at all, the right way. Lent is a tough time; we discover all of our losses, and failures, and inadequacies. The disciples discovered that they couldn't think Jesus' thoughts or do Jesus' work. They had conflicts and disagreements with Jesus in such an intense way that they argued with each other.

The Apostle Paul talks about the time that he was taken into the Third Heaven and saw a vision of what heaven was like. He said there were no words to express it. And he wondered with God, "Why is it that you've taken me to this wonderful place?" The Apostle Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 12, that the Lord gave him a messenger from Satan to torment him after this. "Thanks a lot, God. You take me to a wonderful place and then you send Satan to beat me up on a regular basis. What's that about?" But the Apostle Paul explains, "It was for this purpose - to keep me from being too self-elated, a thorn was given to me, a messenger from Satan, three times I appealed to the Lord, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'" This wonderful transforming moment, and the power of it, is made perfect in the weakest moments – the time when we look the worst. We want to hold on, but Jesus is saying, "You must go down the mountain and let go."

Probably the most important moment of this whole experience on the mountain was the end, when Elijah and Moses disappear into the cloud. When the cloud lifts, they only see Jesus. They become fascinated that Jesus is the only one left. All the Prophets and all the Law find themselves fulfilled in the presence of Jesus. And Jesus will take them into the future. Jesus is the total Word of God. That focus on the mountain, the experience, is only complete when we become fascinated with Jesus alone. There are a lot of other possibilities we can lean into. There are a lot of other purposes and missions we can see... but the purpose of the Mount of Transfiguration is: Jesus, alone – an exclusive attention on Jesus.

It strikes me that, in this day of struggling, religious plurality, and battles going on in all parts of the Earth, that we could do well to see Jesus only. Among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, Jesus carries an over-arching transcendent attraction. We may lose our Christian religion, but we shall not lose Jesus and the Gospel.

There's a great summit meeting of history at the Council of Nicea in 325. It was all about who Jesus is. There were two differing parties at war with each other; they were torturing each other, abusing each other, and exiling each other. They were doing damage to each other, having a major battle over who was right about Jesus. Eneas on one side, bringing the Eastern view of Jesus, and Athanasius on the other side, bringing the Western view of Jesus; and what we have in our Nicene Creed is the result of that. But it was after one hundred years of battle. They could see, in the Council of Nicea in 325, the possibility of resolving it. But it wasn't until almost one hundred years later that it was resolved. "Jesus, Very God of Very God, of one substance with the Father, came down and was made human." Jesus has always been with the Father; it's all about Jesus.

The transformation of our lives is what happens when Jesus leads us down the mountain. Jesus doesn't leave us up there because Jesus wants to change us. We're not going to be changed up there on that mountain. We think that the good times transform us. But those are just the dreams and the visions; the real change comes down when we are in trouble, and only Jesus is the one we can lean into. That inner transformation does not happen up there; it happens when we're in the pits...when we're moving toward the cross...when we see Jesus as the One who is willing to suffer and die, and take us to the cross with him.

A recent PBS documentary on the Emancipation Proclamation and the Reconstruction that followed, clearly points out that that mountaintop experience of emancipation was short-lived, and the Reconstruction was de-constructed. It was one hundred years of painful valley, shadows of death, torture and struggle, before the Civil Rights movement finally moved us to a better place. One hundred years. What was that all about? It was about America coming to maturity in the vision of people understanding the way of Jesus the Christ.

I long to see my grandfather, whom we visited up there in those Tehachapi Mountains. I long to remember and experience again those grand summits near his little ranch. Where there is a little taste of heaven and where we rode tractors and rowed across the lakes. We climbed the rolling hills and hiked up the steep mountains. We picked ripe apples and pears; we rode horses, milked cows, harvested oats, and we talked about God. And I'll never forget sitting there on the little bench around the big oak tree in the front yard with my grandfather, listening to him talk about heaven. It was not too long after that, he went to heaven.

I long for the time when we will find the last summit. But leading up to that time is a time of work; a time of grace; and a time of weakness. God gives us that final vision to help us through these hard places of life. And Jesus is the only One who can lead us through it – Jesus alone. So we join with the Apostle Paul in realizing that we forget what is behind us – even the high moments that have been behind us. And we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. That's the point of transfiguration.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you meet us here on this mountain today, that we might see you, hear the word from the Prophets and the Law, and know that the Gospel covers all things. Lead us now down the mountains into places where we can walk with you in our weakness, and lean into your grace as being sufficient for all things. For it is Jesus who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Amen.