***WHAT WAS THAT?***

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Texts: Mark 9:2-10 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Several years ago, Karen and I met our Scottish friends, Derick and Morag Macaskill, in Los Angeles and drove with them from the City of Angels through Sin City sometimes called Las Vegas (where it was 115 degrees) into the canyonlands of Utah. We hiked in Zion National Park for a couple of days and then drove over to Bryce Canyon to spend a day hiking among its spectacular red spires, hoodoos, and cliff tops before heading south to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. We arrived there in the afternoon and joined a kaleidoscope of folks from around the world on the observation decks on the rim of the canyon. It was a bright, clear day and the view into the canyon and across the vast expanse to the other side was fantastic. Karen and I had been to the Grand Canyon twice before, but it was Morag and Derick’s first visit. As we stood gazing out at the stunning view it was remarkable how quiet folks were, as if in awe of what they were seeing. After a few minutes, I asked our friends what they thought of it. Morag pondered a moment and then said, “When we get back home friends will ask us what it was like, and I will have to say, ‘There are no words that can describe it.’”

How do you describe the indescribable? What do you say when your search for words comes up empty because no words are adequate? That was our experience at the Grand Canyon and in a handful of other places across the years – awed silence, beauty that took away all words and sometimes our breath. Perhaps you have had such experiences too. Mountaintop experiences we sometimes call them, though they may happen in the valley or on the rim of a canyon or at sea as well as on any mountaintop. Surely that was the experience of John, James, and Peter as they stood on the mountain and saw Jesus transfigured before them, his clothes suddenly glowing whiter than white! Surely that was their experience when Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with the transfigured Jesus, though how the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah remains a mystery. What do you say at a moment like that when you are in such awe that you are not sure just what you are seeing? According to the text, John and James said nothing; they simply stood there in awed silence. But Peter, not knowing what to say according to Mark, still felt the need to say something.

We all know a Peter or two, those who have no unuttered thoughts, those who have a need to say something even when there is nothing to say. As a friend once said of my brother in his younger days, “You don’t have to worry about what Jim is thinking, because he’s saying it.” If that were true for Peter, then what he was thinking was, “We gotta do something!” It was not enough to bask in the glow of this heavenly event, to soak in the wonder of something never seen before on the face of the earth. For Peter, the moment demanded action of some kind, and the only thing he could think to suggest was to build booths for each of these titans of the faith. Perhaps it was an attempt to make that ground holy for generations to come, or perhaps more likely, it was the first thing that came into his mind. As Mark notes, “He did not know what to say, for they were terrified!”

We tend to think of the transfiguration as a holy glow on the mountain that offered some kind of awed warm comfort to Peter, James, and John. As one hymn writer describes it in a hymn we are NOT singing today:

*O wondrous sight, O vision fair of glory that the church shall share,*

*which Christ upon the mountain shows, where brighter than the sun he glows!*

What! A wondrous sight, a vision fair! Where is that in the text? According to Mark, the transfiguration was a terrifying event, something so far beyond the disciples’ wildest experiences and imaginations that they were left quaking in their sandals. They had no idea *what* was happening or *why* it was happening or *what* might happen next – to Jesus or to them. And when the cloud rolled over top of them and the voice rang out like quiet thunder saying, “This is my beloved son. Listen to him!” they were terrified all the more. It is an awesome, overwhelming thing to stand in the presence of God and to hear God’s voice ring out, not mediated through the voice of a prophet, but spoken directly to you!

*Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*, says the psalmist. Well, those three disciples must have been a little wiser from that experience, for they were indeed afraid. But it was holy fear as they stood on what had suddenly become holy ground. Then as quickly as it all came upon them, it was all gone – the glowing clothes of Jesus; Moses and Elijah; the cloud with the divine voice – all gone. Suddenly, says Mark, they stood alone with Jesus – the untransfigured Jesus, the Jesus with whom they had climbed the mountain, the one who they had been following for three years. Suddenly it was just them on the mountain, and I wonder if they wondered, “What was that?” Was it real? What was that thing that happened to Jesus and to them on the mountaintop?

What it was is something called a theophany, an earthly encounter with God – like Moses at the burning bush, like Elijah in a cave trying to escape the wrath of Jezebel, like Paul on the Damascus Road on his way to persecute some more Christians. Theophanies are rare and overwhelming and life-changing. They often set those who experience them on a new course. After their theophanies, Moses heads back to Egypt to confront pharaoh, Elijah heads back to civilization with a powerful word from the Lord, Saul becomes Paul the apostle. Yet it is hard to see how Peter, James, and John were changed by the theophany they experienced there on the mountain.

They were not immediately sent anywhere or told to proclaim some word from the Lord; in fact Jesus tells them to keep silent about what they have seen and heard, to tell no one about this extraordinary encounter on the mountaintop until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. What then was the point of having them there to witness it? What was the point of having them see Jesus with Moses and Elijah if they could not share it with the world to confirm his identity as the messiah? What was the point of being told to “listen to him” if they could not tell others that the voice of God had said, “listen to him” in order to convince them to listen too? I can’t help but wonder if they came down from that mountain wondering, “What was that all about?” Oddly, Mark suggests that the burning question in their minds was not, “What was that all about?” but “What was that comment about rising from the dead all about?”

Perhaps it is that question that is the key to the whole transfiguration experience. For, until his resurrection from the dead none of what happened on top of that mountain made much sense, apart from the voice of God saying, “Listen to him!” The disciples could not understand the meaning of Moses and Elijah meeting with Jesus until after the resurrection when they understood that Jesus was the one fulfilling the law and prophets. They could not understand the voice declaring, “This is my beloved Son!” until they heard Jesus say from the cross, “Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit” as he breathed his last, and then met the risen Jesus after Easter’s dawn. They could not understand the glowing clothes until they more fully understood that Jesus of Nazareth whom they followed was truly the Messiah, the Son of God!

We have the benefit of knowing what those disciples did not know when they stood there on the mountain. We know that Jesus is the messiah, and we know what kind of messiah he is. We know that after he came down from that mountain he would be crucified and raised from the dead. We know the end of his story as we hear Mark’s account of the Transfiguration, and so we know what those disciples were still trying to puzzle out – that on that mountaintop there was indeed a theophany, not only in the voice from the cloud saying, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” but in the presence of Jesus himself. For what we know that the disciples did not know until after the resurrection is that every encounter with Jesus was a theophany, every day spent with Jesus a theophany, every touch and spoken word and blessing and healing was a theophany – an encounter with God on earth in the flesh!

As one writer suggests: “They who seek God with all their hearts, must…some day on their way meet Jesus.”[[1]](#endnote-1) For in Jesus we meet God; in him we experience God. That is the good news we proclaim. It is the good news of Easter in the encounters with the risen Christ, but it is also the good news of this Transfiguration Sunday when we recall Jesus’ identity revealed to the disciples on the mountaintop. What was that? It was a theophany, like every experience with Jesus, an encounter with God! Listen to him then –

Listen when he says, “Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Listen when he says, “Forgive not 7 times, but 70 times 7 times.”

Listen when he says, “If you would be my disciple then deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me.”

Listen when he says, “As you do to the least of these, so you do to me.”

Listen when he says, “The first shall be last and the last first.”

Listen when he says, “Believe in God, believe also in me.”

Listen when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Listen when he says, “You are the light of the world.”

Listen to him, for his voice is the voice of God, the voice of God speaking to you! Amen

1. Heinrich Weinel and Alban G. Widgery, *Jesus in the 19th Century and After*, quoted by Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press:1976, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)