

**A Sermon for Every Sunday**  
**A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes**  
**for Transfiguration Sunday, 2021**  
**Mark 8:27-9:9**

I want to begin this sermon with something not particularly sermon-y: a little guided meditation. Just a minute or two. I want to give you a moment to reflect on your own life. I invite you to begin by sitting as comfortably as you can where you are. Take a deep breath in, and let it out. Then, if you feel safe doing so, close your eyes, or if you'd rather, choose a point in front of you to look at ... and soften your gaze as you look.

I invite you to imagine your life like a path through the woods. Like any forest path, this path has twists and turns. It has level places that are easy to walk and also steep climbs that leave you breathless. There are wide-open vistas where you can see for miles ... and also places you feel confused or afraid – places you aren't sure which way to turn. There are highs and lows along this path.

This is your life we're talking about – this path you are traveling. So, think for a moment: what is one time in your life you had that wide-open-vista feeling? – a time you felt an emotional high.

Maybe it was a time you accomplished something (even a small thing) that went *GREAT* ... or a time you were able *just to be still* and at peace ... or a time you experienced some remarkable clarity ... or a time you felt joy bubbling up inside of you. We sometimes call these *mountain-top experiences*. What is one of yours?

Were you alone in this moment? If not, who was with you?

Allow the goodness of this moment to wash over you.

And now (you may have guessed this was coming) think of a time in your life that your path became particularly difficult – a time you felt an emotional low. Maybe you had suffered some accident or illness ... some setback or disappointment ... some loss or tragedy. Maybe you felt a blow to your confidence ... or a deep confusion about the next step you needed to take ... or an inability even to get out of bed in the morning.

Where were you at this low point?

Were you alone? If not, who was with you?

If your eyes are closed, I invite you to open them now. Take a deep breath in, and let it out.

We'll come back to your own journey in a bit. But now ... let's think about Jesus' journey.

Today we reach a turning point in the gospel according to Mark. Up until now, Jesus has been ministering in the northeastern part of Israel. He has been healing and teaching, stilling storms and feeding thousands, confronting authorities and raising up disciples. All the while people have been asking: who is he? For the first half of the gospel, the identity of Jesus has been obscured, even intentionally. Now he is ready to talk about it.

Before they ascend the mountain we read about today, Jesus asks his disciples: who do people say that I am? But what he's really interested in, is who THE DISCIPLES say he is. Peter is the one to speak up, "You are the Christ," he says.

Peter is right and also *NOT* right. The word *Christ* means *Messiah*, and it indicates Jesus as God's anointed one – the one in whom God's power and purposes will be made known. So far, so good. But like most Jews, Peter must've had some clear expectations for God's Messiah. Specifically, he would have imagined the Christ to be strong and powerful in traditional ways: the Messiah was meant to provide leadership and protection to God's people – to restore the kingdom of David. So when Jesus goes on to say that the Messiah must suffer and be rejected and be killed and finally rise, Peter doesn't just object. He *takes hold of Jesus, scolds him, and begins to correct him*. He's objecting intellectually to the idea that God's Messiah would suffer and die. He's also objecting emotionally to the thought of this agony for his friend. But Jesus does *NOT* back down. In fact he corrects Peter as sternly as anyone could, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus will spend the second half Mark's gospel redefining "Messiah" for Peter and the other disciples and, ultimately, all the world.

But first, the mountaintop. Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain. There Jesus is transformed so that his glory shines through, his clothes become dazzlingly bright, and he is seen to speak with two of Israel's heroes: Moses and Elijah. This reminds me of the shared Near Death Experiences a member of my congregation has researched and told me about. There's a bright light .... And here Jesus is seen to associate with saints from the spirit realm. (I heard someone suggest that these friends from "back home" may have come to offer Jesus some support, since his "earth friends" weren't endorsing his mission.)

Peter, James, and John saw *MOSES AND ELIJAH* with Jesus. Moses and Elijah were eschatological figures – widely associated with the end times. Their presence, plus that voice from heaven ("this is my son, whom I love, LISTEN TO HIM) should have made it clear to the disciples that *Jesus was NOT to be doubted, let alone scolded*. His word was like God's word. They were meant to believe it.

In each of the gospels, Peter sees all of this and says, "It's good that we're here." He suggests they build some booths or shrines on the mountain – one for each prophet. I don't know what motivated Peter, or what he had in mind when he suggested building some shrines. As Mark tells it, Peter hardly knew himself. Like the other disciples, Peter was terrified and didn't know how to respond to the transfigured Jesus. I personally find his shrine suggestion appealing. I wrote most of this sermon while sitting across from a shrine I built in my home: a little cabinet where I keep all sorts of things full of memory

and meaning: hand carved crosses, rocks and shells worn smooth by the sea, candles, clay nativities. I feel good as I look at those things. I feel inspired, peaceful, determined. It provides a mini mountain-top experience right there in my living room. But Peter's suggestion is often interpreted as a desire to stay up there on the mountain! He's seen as wanting to build a place to live where it's safe and shiny and reassuring. Think again about *YOUR mountain* – the emotional high you remembered earlier. Don't we all want to stay in places we feel good? Peter's impulse to *build shrines* up there on the mountain may reflect his resistance to engaging the hard stuff below.

Over and over in Mark's gospel it's made clear that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing and subject of dazzling glory, and also the Human One, who will be betrayed and persecuted and crucified. Like many Christians throughout the church's life, Peter and the disciples wanted the glory they could see without the message they had to hear, and who could blame them? Who could blame the disciples for not wanting to believe Jesus "must" suffer?

*WHY Jesus must suffer* is a natural question to ask, and the answer is by no means clear. My friend Leanne Pearce Reed got to wondering about that. She said, "Even in Mark, where the cross is said to be necessary time and again, it's unclear *WHY* that's true. "Christ will give his life to liberate many," it says in chapter 10. Sounds like a ransom of some kind . . . but the gospel offers no details. Some scholars take another tack on the necessity of the cross; they say that, because Jesus advocated for true justice, he threatened the people in power . . . that what was *INEVITABLE* was Jesus' clash with the rulers of the day. That may also be true. But Leanne suggested it was something else. She thought Christ's suffering was necessary not as ransom or payment, and not so much because of politics, but because *suffering is part of what it means to be human*, and Jesus was fully human.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus could have stayed on the mountain, but he chose to come down. *Down*, says preacher David Lose. "Down into the mundane nature of everyday life. Down into the nitty-gritty details of misunderstanding, squabbling, disbelieving disciples. Down into the religious and political quarrels of the day. Down into the jealousies and [rivalries] both petty and gigantic that color our relationships. Down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of our life in this world. Down. Jesus came down."<sup>2</sup> He meant to share the difficulties common to humanity . . . meant to walk with people into the valleys of suffering and pain, along the paths of hardship and effort, even through the doorway of death.

Think again about your valley, your low point, your challenging path. When I asked if anyone was with you, did Jesus come to mind? One of the sure and certain tenets of our faith is that, whether we know it or not, Jesus accompanies us – mountain-top *AND VALLEY*, Christ is with us. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from Christ. And his company can make all the difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Leanne Pearce Reed, in her 2012 paper for the Moveable Feast.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=557](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=557) He Came Down

Bear with me, as I tell you a story I got to remembering – a story I heard a number of years ago, right after an earthquake in Haiti – the worst earthquake, a truly devastating one. There was a young man named Joseph, whose parents both died in the quake. I saw a video where Joseph told about how his extended family had come to help him and his siblings with the burial. “They saw how upset we were,” Joseph said, “so they performed a burial ritual for us. They took my parents’ clothes and wrapped them around my waist. Then they helped us stand up, hold the casket, and carry it over to the tomb for burial. We were so emotionally weak at the time. But after we wrapped [our parents’] clothes around us, we could complete the burial and try to move forward. The clothes [our parents] wore in life gave us the courage and the strength to stand at the funeral and put them in the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

I find that such a powerful image – a young man wrapped in his parents’ clothes, and thereby enabled to do the hardest thing he’d ever done. Then I think about Jesus’ transfigured clothes. On the mountain they became amazingly bright – brighter than anyone on earth could bleach them! This detail in Mark’s story tells us we have left behind the ordinary, for something completely outside of human experience. Jesus was human, but in *this moment* it’s clear: he has access to a power from God.

Think again about your valley, your low point, your challenging path. Imagine, in the midst of that darkness, wrapping Jesus Christ’s *garments of light* around your shoulders.

The Apostle Paul imagines it (kind of) in today’s passage from Second Corinthians. He says, “God has shone into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ. We have this treasure in clay pots,” he says, so it’s clear that the *awesome power* belongs to God and doesn’t come from us. But we can wrap ourselves up in it, and when we do, he says, we may experience all kinds of trouble, but we won’t be crushed. We may be confused, but we won’t be depressed. We may be harassed, but we won’t be abandoned. We may be knocked down, but we won’t be knocked out ... Even if our bodies are wasting away, Paul says, deep within we are being renewed. Deep within, we are growing more glorious. Deep within, we are being held safe and transfigured by God.

Even in the valley, Christ’s presence and power are available to give God’s people the courage and strength to do what we need to do, which is *TO FOLLOW HIM*. Peter learned that the hard way, as all humans do. Peter learned it by following Jesus down the mountain into places full of suffering and despair. Even there, *he kept seeing Christ’s glory shine* upon all kinds of people, amidst various highs and lows. And Peter learned to *thank God* for a Messiah like that: a Christ who comes down.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://gamic.pcusa.org/ministries/global/sacred-space-brother-provides/>