

**Mark 9:1-9**

*The Panoramic View*

February 11, 2021 (Transfiguration Sunday)

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling clean, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Humanity had risen from the dead.

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India’s Coronavirus shutdown began on March 22 of last year. By April 9—less than three weeks later—pollution levels had dropped so much that residents of Punjab could see the peaks of the Himalayas for the first time in thirty years.<sup>1</sup>

After that length of time, I imagine there were Punjabis who didn’t even know they were *supposed* to be able to see those peaks, 125 miles away—then suddenly, there they were, jagged-white against the blue sky.

When Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up to the mountaintop, he was giving them an opportunity for a similar experience, only from the other direction. Whereas Punjabis were finally able to see the mountains from their home in the valley, Jesus wanted the disciples to finally see the world from the top of the mountain. And they needed that view. They needed it because, right before this scene, Jesus had dropped a bomb on them, declaring that he was going to undergo suffering and rejection and be executed—and that, if they were truly his followers, they would have to be willing to give their lives, as well.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-09/himalayas-visible-india-pollution/12136856>

As you can imagine, Jesus' statement had thrown them into confusion and resistance. Peter pulled Jesus aside to rebuke him, which made Jesus rebuke Peter right back, warning that, "Anyone who wants to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the good news, will save it."

That was a lot to throw at the disciples—to show them the valley of struggle and suffering that they were about to face. They needed to step back for a moment. They needed to get up out of the chaos and mayhem and fear, and take some time apart to get their bearings. So here they are, finally, with Jesus, at the top of the mountain, where they can see clearly in every direction—past, present, and future.

With the presence of Moses and Elijah, they have a view to previous mountain peaks—back to the peak of Mt. Sinai, where God gave Moses the framework for a just and peaceful community as they journeyed from slavery to freedom.

Back to the peak of Mt. Horeb, where Elijah, on the run from his battle against a corrupt and oppressive government, heard God speak in the voice of silence, and headed right back down to reengage the struggle.

Off in the future, is a view of Calvary, where the suffering of which Jesus warned them would reach its peak; but beyond that, the spiritual high point of resurrection, which would eclipse everything else, and open the way to a new life for everyone.

Meanwhile, right beside them, there in the present, the promise of that new life is gleaming in the person of Jesus, whose worn and dusty robes suddenly shine like new—new garments for a new day.

This is what they could see, or could have seen, if their vision hadn't been shrouded by terror and their thinking muddled by all the wrong assumptions getting in the way.

“Let’s make a tent for all three of you!” Peter blurts out to Jesus and Elijah and Moses, desperately trying to normalize the situation. So God blocks out the vision and booms in exasperation: “This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!”

There they are, on the top of that mountain, and they can’t really take in the view.

Now, I wouldn’t exactly call this year of COVID a mountaintop experience. And yet, it’s done something like what happened on that mountain with Jesus. The pandemic shut everything down for us about the same time as it did in India. It was right in the middle of Lent—remember? We had had Ash Wednesday, in which we were called upon to see—*really see*—our mortality, and how utterly reliant we are on the grace of God.

And then, suddenly, everything was all *about* mortality. Touching the wrong surface could make us carriers of death. Breathing too close to the wrong person could end up wiping out our whole family. Everything we thought of as normal life was suddenly pulled out from under us, as those of us who could, hunkered down; and those of us who couldn’t put their lives on the line every day, sometimes for minimum wage.

It’s a whole different vantage point from one we’ve ever had. So, what have we seen?

What have we seen about the life of our church. Do we have a better sense of what really matters, and what doesn’t?

What have we seen about our world—who has power, who has wealth, who is considered expendable?

What have we seen about our relationships—Which ones are life giving? Which ones need transformation? Which ones just suck us dry?

It's been said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Yet already we're starting to lose the view. Our yearning for "normal" life has led us to come down the pandemic mountain way too early—back to restaurants and risky gatherings. And the things that were novel, like Zoom meetings, now feel routine. And whereas the sudden silence of the shutdown made us listen in new ways to the cries of the oppressed; and the immediate concern for the poor who would be most impacted brought an outpouring of charitable giving—our initial attentiveness, now, is beginning to waver. We're settling into impatient numbness and our hearing is being dulled by the hum of media noise.

So, welcome back to Lent. It's all about to begin again, this week, with Ash Wednesday. It won't be like last year. We can't turn to our neighbor and swipe the ashes across their warm forehead, look into their eyes, and say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

We will have to make the Ash Wednesday journey separately, through self-guided Prayer Stations.

And that will lead right back into the whole journey of Lent—which, in fact, feels as though it never ended. As though we've yet to really have an Easter.

But before we start whining about what we haven't had and all that we're still missing, let's quiet down again. Jesus never left our side, as he accompanied us out of the normal. He has something he's still trying to say to us, and he has something he still wants us to see.

Shh. Look around.

Back there behind us are all the ways we've struggled and failed to be God's people. Out there, ahead of us, is the vision of something new and different and more faithful.

And here beside us is Jesus.

Those of us who survive this could come down from this pandemic pretty much the same as we went in, and resume our same old weary lives, much the way they were; in this same, old broken world, much the way it was.

Or, we can finally stop, look, and listen—really listen to what Jesus has to say to us. We can look—really look--toward that mountain of new life where peace and justice and beloved community gleam just beyond Calvary, and we can finally set our steps in that direction, leaving our old ways behind.

As Paul reminds us, “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life is gone; a new life has begun.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

So let’s not waste this moment. Let’s not lose this view. Whatever sacrifices we need to make, whatever struggles we need to take on, let’s listen to Jesus and follow, so that we can come out of this shining like the sun.