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Change
 Mark 9:2-9

High above the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, there is a statue. The statue rises far above the treeline, not unlike our Vulcan, on top of a mountain— a real mountain, Mt. Corcovado- overlooking the city. Unlike Vulcan, this statue does not pay homage to the city's glory days of steel manufacturing. Called Christ the Redeemer, the statue depicts Jesus, arms outstretched as if seeking to embrace heaven itself. 98 feet tall, made of reinforced concrete finished with sandstone, Christ the Redeemer can be seen from miles around. It is lit up at night with massive spotlights, so it glows with otherworldly beauty. Radiant, towering over the sprawling metropolis of Rio, it is an incredible statue – one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

It is this glowing wonder that comes to mind when I read the story of the transfiguration: a story that tells of Jesus changed before his disciples' very eyes from a man into a glorious shining creature – no longer quite human – heavenly to behold yet terrifying to witness, accompanied by the two greatest prophets in Israel's long history: Moses and Elijah. If that were not enough, we have God's voice booming across the sky: "This is my Son, whom I love: Listen. to. him."

I don't know what exactly happened up there on that mountaintop so long ago, nor do I know how. But I can guess why.

At this point in Mark's story, Jesus and his disciples are turning toward Jerusalem, they are beginning their journey there. Just as we, too, here at the edge of Lent, are turning toward Jerusalem, to make our own journey toward the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary, the insanity of Christ crucified and the joy of Christ arisen.

Here, on a mountaintop, God's glory is revealed in Christ – Peter, James, and John should have no doubt about who he is, and what he came to do. This vision, this theophany, whatever we decide to call it: this revelation of the glory of God, was intended to give the disciples faith that no matter what lies ahead of them - the conflict and condemnation, the suffering and grief – God is with them, in and through Christ.

This is a passage thick with meaning and symbolism. Along with the dazzling physical transformation of Jesus, the disciples see Moses and Elijah appear with him: the two other prophets who have seen God and lived. Moses, you'll recall, met God on the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the ten commandments. Picture a wild eyed, white haired Charlton Heston making his way back down the mountain, his face shining from the encounter. Elijah is on the run, hiding out at Mt Horeb- and he hears the voice of God not in a storm,

nor an earthquake, nor the flame, but as a still small voice in the quiet. Elijah covers his face, and goes out to meet God.

The mountaintop is a place of transcendence, the place where revelation happens. It's hard to know what's happening on the mountaintop in this story - is it heaven? Is it eternity? Time out of time? It's a liminal space, where the prophets of the past meet the disciples of the present, who witness Christ's future glorification. It's also a place to gain perspective.

Your session and team leaders have revisited our Going Forward strategic plan over the past two months, and strategic work is mountaintop work. You have to get up to a higher elevation to be able to look down and have a broad perspective on what we're called to do as a church, where we think God is leading us, and how we can best get there. Some people call it going up to the balcony – or choir loft for that matter, in this sanctuary – whatever gets you out of the weeds of the everyday and into a higher realm of thinking.

It's an exciting place to be. It's also a little bit scary. Because we're in an in-between place, where we know who we are and where we've been, and can see where God is calling us to go: a church that makes God's love and justice known in the city of Birmingham. A church as inclusive and diverse as God's love. A building not just restored but a fully utilized resource for the city. A people who speak up, reach out, and build bridges. We can see where we are being called to go, and the teams are hard at work to figure out the best way to get there.

Strategic planning is increasingly hard to do effectively, because the world is changing so rapidly. One of the only things we can count on is change – it's one of the few constants. Change means we must be flexible, adaptable – as an institution, as a people. And the good news is that Christ is present to us in the midst of change.

The word transfiguration itself means a complete change in form or appearance – Jesus the man, transformed into a shining deity. It's not clear from the text if the Spirit brings this change upon Jesus, or if the disciples are able to see Christ's true self for the first time. The message is clear: Christ is both human and the son of God. But once the vision goes away, and the disciples head back down the mountain, has anything really changed?

That's the funny thing about change. It can be hard to achieve, even harder to trust. Sometimes, like the image of a radiant Jesus, change can be fleeting.

Our encounters with transcendence so often are. Founder of the Catholic Social Worker movement, Dorothy Day, writes about riding a bus in the city, surrounded by forlorn and hopeless people. Anyone who's ever been on public transportation knows exactly what she's talking about. Men and women exhausted by the world, isolated and lonely as they watch out the window and await their destination. Dorothy supposedly looked around, initially aggrieved by the hopelessness around her. Then she was overcome by love – for she could see that Christ was present on the bus, in all people, everywhere. She realized

that giving food or shelter to anyone who asks for it, anyone who needs it, is giving it to Christ.

Nothing had changed. But everything had changed.

I wonder if this is not the meaning of the transfiguration for us. Moments of transcendence are possible! We can encounter the mystery and wonder of God, and it changes everything about how we see the world, and God's place in it. It may not happen on the mountaintop, it may happen in the weeds of day-to-day life, in a sanctuary or a classroom or a courtroom or on a city bus. Suddenly, we can see the radiance of Christ – God – present in the world around us.

J Phillip Newell, a peripatetic prophet of the Iona Community, says that Christ came into the world to awaken our inner memory of God. We're all made in the image and likeness of God, we just have to be able to recognize it: to see other people as the bearers of God's love and light. Nothing has changed, but everything is different.

In the magical world of Harry Potter, things are rarely exactly what they seem. Transformations happen frequently: you can even change into someone else entirely with the right potion. In Harry's very first transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall transforms her crow into a water goblet. Harry's friend Ron Weasley attempts to change his rat, Scabbers, into a goblet, but ends up with a hairy cup – with a swishing tail. Too often our attempts at change end up like poor Scabbers – neither a cup nor a rat, but somewhere in between. An incomplete transfiguration.

I think that's part of being human – like Ron, we don't always do change well. Try as we might, even knowing that Christ is within us, and confident in God's presence in the world, our awareness of the holy can be fleeting. Our old ways of being too comfortable. We fall back into indifference to poverty, into selfishness, into complacency and despair. I think one of the reasons to come back here week after week is the hope that somehow in the silence, in the singing, in the light through the windows or the taste of bread and cup, in people who welcome and love us just as we are, God meets us here and is made real.

The image of that statue, Christ the Redeemer, towering over the city is fitting for another reason. Up on the mountaintop, Rio is gorgeous. The ocean is stunning, the beach white, the lights twinkling. But go down the mountain, and quickly one finds that there is gut wrenching violence and poverty in Rio. The favelas lack proper sanitation and potable water, people are truly suffering.

That is where we are called to go. As much as I can identify with Peter- let's build tents and stay up on the mountaintop for a while! Christ's work is in the valley. God's presence is needed where people are hurting the most. God's glory is revealed not just in the radiance of the mountaintop but in the darkness of slums, the absurdity of the cross. In the ordinary muck and mire of everyday life.

My prayer is that our church will use this mountaintop time to find new inspiration, new determination and focus for our ministry in the valley. My hope is that our eyes will be opened this week, to see the radiant beauty of Christ in the people and world around us, that our hearts will be opened to love him, our hands opened to serve him. And that in so doing, we ourselves might be transformed.