

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/26/06**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Text: Mark 9:2-9**

The story from Mark's Gospel, which we've just heard, is quite strange. I'd like to walk through the details of this story with you, keeping in mind these questions: Just what is this story about? What might it have meant to the early church, from which it arose? Is it true? Why might this story have been chosen, in the lectionary cycle, as the Gospel reading for the end of the season of Epiphany? And what meaning might it have for us today?

First, some background. Just before the verses that are appointed for today's text from Mark, Jesus has had a serious conversation with his disciples about his identity. Peter has correctly acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, God's anointed One. Then, Jesus explains to the disciples what his calling as God's anointed One actually means. He says that he'll be rejected by the religious authorities; that he will suffer; that he'll be killed; and that he'll rise after three days. Jesus then adds that any who want to be his disciples must deny themselves and be willing to lose their own lives for the sake of the reign of God.

That must have been quite a sobering conversation for the disciples. They've walked away from the lives that they've been living to follow this man, Jesus, whom they've come to believe is the long-awaited Messiah, who will topple Roman rule and establish justice in the name of the one, true God. Their understanding of the coming of the Messiah had nothing to do with humiliation, self-denial, suffering, or death. I'd guess that some, if not all, of the disciples were questioning their previous confidence in the person and mission of Jesus, and their part in his plan.

That's the context. Six days later, the writer tells us, Jesus takes three of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – up on a high mountain, by themselves. Mountains, in many religious traditions, were understood to be the place nearest heaven, where humanity could draw close to the divine. And on this mountain, Jesus' appearance is transformed, so that his very being shines with a brilliant light. Two great figures from Israel's past – Elijah, representative of the prophets, and Moses, giver of the Law – appear, talking to Jesus.

Peter, in terror and confusion, begins to babble. He suggests that some kind of shelters be erected for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses, presumably so that they all can stay there and prolong this extraordinary experience. But God interrupts. A cloud, indicating the presence of God, overshadows everyone; God's voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And then, as before, it's just the disciples and Jesus. On the way back down the mountain, Jesus instructs the disciples not to talk about what happened until after the resurrection.

What might have been the author's intention in including this story in his Gospel account? Why this, why now, in terms of the overall structure of Mark's Gospel? Most likely, it's to insert into the narrative a glimpse into the future. Hard times are ahead.

From this point on, Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem, and the horror that will unfold there. Before that happens, the disciples are shown that they haven't made a terrible mistake in casting their lot with Jesus; that in him, God's glory is fully revealed. Jesus is the Messiah. In him, the sacred tradition of all of Israel has been fulfilled, indicated by the presence of Elijah and Moses. And in Jesus, God's beloved, who then stands alone, a new era has begun.

There are a couple of reasons why those who put together our lectionary might have chosen this particular story for today – when the liturgical season of Epiphany comes to a close and when the penitential season of Lent is about to begin. The season of Epiphany is about the manifestation of Christ; the revelation to the world of who Jesus really is. Epiphany begins with the bright light of the star that led the Magi to the child Jesus. Epiphany ends with the bright light on top of the mountain at the Transfiguration. There's a lovely symmetry to that.

As well, we, like Jesus' disciples, need a glimpse into what's ahead as we enter the season of Lent. The story of the Transfiguration gives us a taste of the glory and joy of Easter even as we prepare ourselves for the holy season that's focused on Jesus' passion, when we're called to self-examination and repentance.

Did this story really happen as it's written? Is it true? Those are two very different questions. For Christians who take the Bible literally, who believe that the words contained in Scripture came directly from the mouth of God to the fingers of those who wrote the words, the story did happen exactly as it's written. It's historical fact. Our Anglican tradition tends to regard Scripture more broadly. We recognize that the Gospels weren't intended to be chronological, factual accounts of the day to day life of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark - the earliest of our four Gospel accounts - was written forty years after the death of Jesus, from the perspective of the early church, which was facing persecution and which believed itself to be living in the absolute end times. This faith community which became known as the church was trying to assemble individual, oral traditions about Jesus into a coherent whole that might somehow communicate the extraordinary impact of Jesus' life and ministry on their lives. The writer could have prefaced this Gospel with these words, "This is the Jesus we've experienced. This is how we understand who he was and what he was about."

Because what's written in the Gospel of Mark reflects the very real experience of a faith community's encounter with Jesus and their understanding of it, it is absolutely true. And when we, two thousand years later, discover that a story like the Transfiguration resonates with and even articulates our own encounter with Jesus, it continues to be absolutely true.

Isn't it true that our own "mountain-top" experiences help us to see Jesus from a new perspective, revealed in a new light? Isn't it true that the reality of those encounters with the divine help us get through that which awaits us when we come down from the mountain? Isn't it true that we tend to want to prolong such experiences by containing them; setting them in stone as the ultimate and defining moment of our spiritual lives?

Isn't it true that we need to listen very closely to God in order to override our own carefully constructed expectations about who Christ is and what Christ is about in our own lives?

Maybe the Transfiguration isn't such a strange story after all. As we prepare to undertake our Lenten pilgrimage, may we, like the disciples, have the courage to make a trek up the holy mountain. In the weeks of Lent, may we be open to a new experience of God; a new understanding of God. May we listen closely as God speaks to us. Amen.