

Go to the Mountain
Mark 8:31-37, 9:2-8
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
2-15-15

Have you ever had an experience in your life, one that was pivotal to your life's course? Was it a good or bad? Maybe it was when you first laid eyes upon that man or woman sitting next to you. Maybe it was a close call where you nearly had something really bad happen. For me, that moment happened on a river. I was a counselor at Camp Ojibway, leading a group of kids from Minneapolis who had never been outside the city, on an inner-tube trip down the St. Croix River.

While about 3 miles from where the bus was to pick us up, the weather turned. A thunderstorm rolled in and lightning began to flash. Floating in a river is not a good place to be when you're surrounded by lightning. So we pulled all the kids off the river, only there wasn't path on which for us to walk the remaining 3 miles. So there we were, 8 college students leading 60 screaming elementary school children through tall reeds, not really exactly sure if we were heading in the right direction.

Finally, we did reach the bus and got the children safely on and headed for camp. And as I sat there, I realized that this was a turning point in my life. It was there that I first felt God saying to me, *This is what you will do: I want you to walk with people—sometimes even against their wills—into the river, into that chaotic and uncertain place where they must trust God, and lead them through to the place where they can look back and see Christ in the midst of it all.*

I also realized that this was a wonderful metaphor for a life of following Christ. Walking hand in hand with people into the places of our deepest fear, our deepest shame, our most profound hope, where all we can do trust God. And it's there, while everything around us remains fuzzy, that the power and presence of Jesus Christ becomes razor sharp. Sometimes we have to go to the river – or in the case of the passage today, the mountain – to understand and see God clearly.

And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

What does Jesus mean when he says to us we must take up our crosses to follow him? Does it mean suffer? This doesn't sound right. To this point, it's been nothing but

teaching and healing for Jesus. I mean, Jesus has rock star credibility right now, everything is coming up Christ. And the disciples, they're on board. They're like, "Keep this party rolling Jesus." To others, the news, these stories being told, were just too compelling to ignore.

This is where faith begins: with a curiosity, a willingness to investigate, to come and check him out. To test out what Jesus says. To lean on him and see if his message is strong enough to hold up our questions, our misgivings. To see if he's going to stand with us as the waters rise.

Country music singer Emmylou Harris has a song called *Jerusalem Tomorrow* in which she tells the story of a local trickster who makes a living swindling people out of their money with fake illusions and miracles. That is, until people completely lose interest in his game.

You're pretty good, one of them says, but you should have seen this guy come through last week, he was something else. Instead of calling fire from above, he gets real quiet and talks about love. And I'll tell you something funny, he didn't want nobody's money. Not sure what it means, but it's the darndest thing I ever did see. I decide to go and find him, and find out who's behind him. He has everyone convinced that he's for real, I figure we can work ourselves out a deal. So he offers me a job and I say fine he says I'll get paid off on down the line. Well I guess I'll string along, don't see how too much can go wrong. As long as he pays my way I guess I'll follow, we're headed for Jerusalem tomorrow.

In the middle ages, it was a theologian by the name of Anselm of Milan who coined the phrase "faith seeking understanding." Jesus invites you to trust him, to test his trustworthiness, even before you understand all the facets of faith. There are some things, at least when we begin, we accept as true, but only later begin to understand them in full.

For the disciples, though, faith looked more like fanaticism. The disciples' faith, Peter's in particular, was like an unbridled colt, wild and unpredictable, exciting and exhilarating, and just a bit dangerous. Peter is the bull in a china shop, ready to do anything for Jesus. But Jesus' words to Peter stop him in his tracks.

Precisely at the moment Peter thinks he knows the direction God is moving, right about the time Peter is saying, "Ok Lord, set me loose," Jesus says, "Not so fast, slow down Peter. I know you believe, and I love your enthusiasm, but what you lack is understanding. I've come not to conquer in victory, but to endure and suffer alongside this world in my defeat. Like the prophet Isaiah says in Chapter 53, I am the savior who suffers alongside, not the one who stands atop in victory." Jesus says, "It's when you take up your cross and follow me, bearing with one another in their burdens that you see what my kingdom is really like. This is the understanding that you lack that I want to show you, Peter."

Author Tim Keller puts it this way: “When Peter hears that Jesus is going to Jerusalem, which will entail suffering—almost certainly not just for Jesus but also for him—he’s furious. Why? Because he had an agenda, and his agenda led from strength to strength and it didn’t include suffering. When he sees that Jesus is not working from his agenda, he rebukes him. If we’re not careful, then, our agenda can become the end, and Jesus simply becomes the means to our end. But if Jesus is the King, then you cannot make him a means to your end.” Understanding comes when Jesus gives us our agenda, our purpose, not when we impose our agenda on him.

When Jesus says to us, “Take up your cross and follow me, *for who ever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life or my sake and the gospel’s will save it,*” he’s shifting the disciples’ understanding, he’s reorienting their perspective, he’s saying, “Listen, you have been operating from a place of control and power over your own life. Now it’s time to LET GO! Let me give you the identity and resources for your journey. Make me the center of your life.”

Jesus is not just saying, “I’m going to make you a spiritual person.” Jesus says, “I don’t want you to simply shift from one performance-based identity to another.” What he’s saying is, “I want that old self to die, so that I can live through you and give you new purpose. I want you to lose the old self, the old identity, the old way and base yourself and your identity on me and what I’m about to do.”

But you know what? Turning points need time to set in. Wisdom doesn’t always set in right away. Guys, it’s sort of like when our wives point something out to us we think is right, but they know is wrong—it takes time for our male brains to wrap around the possibility that we could be wrong. And ladies, I want to have a home to come back to, so I’m going to stop there. And so as we come to chapter nine, we learn that Jesus gives his disciples six days to mull over the news.

But then comes the big reveal or the grand finale of this part of the story. You see, instead of asking his disciples to take him on his word and trust that losing their life for his sake was the right thing to do, instead of asking them for their blind faith, Jesus actually shows them something that totally knocks their socks off.

Verse 2 tells of God’s big reveal: **After six days 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 garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them.** And skipping down to verse seven: **And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.**

Centuries before this, according to the book of Exodus, God came down on Mt Sinai in a cloud. The voice of God spoke and everyone was afraid, but Moses went up on the mountain and begged God, “Show me your glory—your infinite greatness and unimaginable beauty.” So what did God do? God passed by Moses, who was hiding in

the rock for safety and God showed Moses his backside. God gave Moses a glimmer of his glory and that was more than enough to lead them through the wilderness.

Here Jesus, after giving his disciples a view of how the story ends at the cross of Calvary, after showing them the full weight of what it meant to follow him, Jesus gives them a glimpse of his glory. Only this time it wasn't reflected glory, it wasn't someone else's glory, as it was with Moses and Elijah. This experience was the very shekinah glory of God himself, in human form, emanating from Jesus Christ. So when the cloud comes down and envelops Jesus, Peter, James and John are standing in the very presence of God Almighty. And not only do they not die, but they are literally surrounded and embraced by the brilliance of God. "Not only am I going to ask you to take up your cross alongside me and follow me," Jesus says, "but I'm going to give you a glimpse of my truest self," what Hebrews 1:3 calls the very radiance of the Glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

Our relationship with God is not simply about believing. That's the first step. Before the disciples went up the mountain, they believed, but now they are drawn in, awestruck, invited into the living wonder that is to walk daily with the God of the universe. Now they see with the eyes of their heart what their minds merely assented to. The presence and glory of God has enveloped them. They have had a foretaste of what all of us are longing for, the very face and embrace of God.

So the question becomes for all of us: Will we bear with one another the crosses we each have to carry? Have we experienced that radiant glory of God that reminds us that it's in the tough times where we actually experience and understand what true mercy and grace and love are really about? Because you see the irony, the great paradox of Christianity is that in deciding to take up our cross alongside Jesus, our fears no longer have power over us, our pride and arrogance no longer guide and manipulate us, our self-centeredness no longer controls us, and our passions and longings no longer consume us, because we have seen the very face of God, and know that that face still shines today as brightly as it did on the Mount of Transfiguration in the faces of those we're called to walk alongside. Only when we take up our crosses and follow Christ all the way to Golgotha are we transformed from those who simply believe, to those who truly understand and know the insurmountable, the incomparable, unsurpassable love of Jesus Christ, God's only son our Lord.

And it is that love that enables us to face every river, every obstacle, every insecurity and know that we stand in the company of a Great God.