

February 7, 2021

Transfiguration Sunday

Perfect Balance

Mark 9:2-9

**Opening words:** According to the Revised Common Lectionary today is Transfiguration Sunday. It reminds of the day Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop. It is found in our reading for today, Mark 9:2-9. However, it is not exclusive to just Mark. It is also found in Matthew and Luke. It has been hypothesized that the first chapter of John alludes to it. Second Peter refers to it. (2 Peter 1:16-18) The Transfiguration is not just about Jesus's identification. It tells us Jesus was the very mouthpiece of God. We must listen to him. Historically, the church considers the transfiguration of Jesus one of the milestones of Jesus's life, along with his baptism, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) considered the transfiguration the most important miracle because it revealed the perfection of heaven. The transfiguration is always remembered the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday. That is today. Let me call this message on Transfiguration Sunday *Perfect Balance*.

**Mark 9:2-9** After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

**3** His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

**4** And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

**5** Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

**6** (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

**7** Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

**8** Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

**9** As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

We find ourselves today in the ninth chapter of Mark. The previous story is noteworthy. Peter has just identified Jesus for the first time as the Messiah. That was a pivotal moment in Jesus's earth ministry. In many ways, it was the beginning of the end. To underscore the importance of that identification Jesus takes the inner circle, Peter, Andrew, James, and John on a field trip. Jesus takes them to a mountaintop. Many believe, the mountain was Mount Tabor, which stands 1,800 feet high, others say it was Mount Hermon, which stands over 9,000 feet high. For our purpose, it does not really matter. They must have believed they were going to the mountaintop to rest and pray. They had no clue what was about to happen. Without warning, the Bible says Jesus

was transfigured. I am not exactly sure what that means, so I cannot explain it. It will have to suffice to say Jesus's appearance changed. He became transparent and luminous at the same time. The four disciples were shocked. Then, this strange story gets stranger. Without warning, the two greatest personalities of the Old Testament suddenly appear. There was Moses, the great law giver, and there was Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets according to the Jews. Overwhelmed by the experience, the disciples struggled how to respond. Peter mentioned something about constructing shelters, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. There is no time for Jesus to respond because the story even gets stranger. Without warning, God, Himself, suddenly appears, hidden by a cloud. The Almighty announces to everyone present Jesus is his son. For this reason, they should listen to him. And as fast as the scene began, it was suddenly over. As they traveled down the mountainside Jesus tried to explain his future ministry, but his words must have fallen on deaf ears. It was simply too much for a human mind to comprehend. The only thing that brings them back to reality is a problem waiting for them at the base of the mountain. There is a demon possessed boy who needs help. We know it is true. Mountaintop experiences are great, but they do not last. We need mountaintop memories to keep us going. However, we live in the valley surrounded by problems. If you have a basic understanding of the story of the story say, "**Amen!**"

The father of the great Methodist movement was John Wesley (1703-1791). His story is well documented. He was homeschooled in Epworth, England by his mother, Susanna. He went to Christ College at Oxford University. It was while he was there, he formed a small group called the Holy Club. They gathered for three reasons: Bible study, prayer, and debate. At some point, the group decided those sacred acts were not enough. They had to help the needy in their community, so they went to the poorest people in that community and sacrificed for their benefit. Wesley even forwent a haircut and gave that money to the poor. The Holy Club had perfect balance. They balanced worship and missions. I appreciate the United Methodist Church because of that balance. That balance of worship and missions is in our DNA. I pray we never lose our balance, for if we do, we will surely fall. John Wesley did not discover that balance between worship and missions. It is found in the story of the transfiguration. Let us look at both sides in more detail.

**First, Peter emphasized worship.** If you want to exist as a church, then you must worship. It is the one thing the church must do and still be considered a church. Peter understood the importance of worship. Look at the story with me. Peter is at the top of the mountain with Andrew, James, and John. They thought they were going to be alone with Jesus to pray. They experienced so much more. They experienced God! It must have been great. Peter appreciated the moment so much he did not want to leave. He wanted to stray. What did it say in verse 5? Peter said, "*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*" Peter emphasized worship.

I appreciate this church because worship is a priority. Prior to the pandemic, we worshipped three times every Sunday morning. We worshipped at various times and in various ways. We worshipped three times on Christmas Eve and four times on Easter morning. We worshipped on Wednesday evenings during Lent. Once the pandemic hit, we found ourselves worshipping in the parking lot using a FM transmitter. Then, we came inside and worshipped virtually. True worship has nothing to do with hymnals, projection systems and organs. True worship has everything to do with experiencing God. Peter emphasized worship and so do we! Because Peter, and us, want to experience God. If you want this church to be what God intended, then we must worship. If you can agree worship is important in the life of the church say, "**Amen!**" Peter emphasized worship! However, in the life of the church, there must be more.

**Second, the other eight disciples emphasized missions.** In the reading beyond our reading, Jesus descends the mountain with Peter, Andrew, James, and John. The four must have been on a spiritual high, but the reality of this world was waiting for them. The other eight disciples are debating with a crowd. In the eye of a debate was a demon-possessed boy. Jesus exorcised the demons because the disciples were unable to do the miraculous. Do not be critical of the eight because they were doing their best to respond to human need. Responding to human need is important because it shows the world our faith is sincere. Churches and individual Christians who do not respond to human are shallow and hypocritical. That is what we found in the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Luke 10:25-37) You know the story.

It all begins with a question. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus was being tested. That question was answered with a story. A man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The man must have been a fool because only a fool would travel that dangerous road alone. That road was notorious. The expected happened. The man is robbed and stripped of his possessions, including his clothes. Laying there in his birthday suit, he is left to die. The good news is people saw him at his time of need. People who should have helped him. There was a Priest and a Levite. The Priest was from the line of Aaron and a leader in the Jewish faith. The Levite was from the line of Levi and had various religious duties. Both spent their lives worshipping, but they never heard a single word. They did not respond to the man in need. Both walked on the other side of the road and refused to help. The unlikely hero in the story is a half breed. The Samaritans were a mixed raced people. They were a combination of Jew and Gentiles. That was shocking to the Jews of Jesus's time. No one expected much from him, but he comes to the aid of his fellow man. The Bible says he had pity on him. I think he had compassion for him. He bandaged his wounds, he got him help, and he gave generosity to his relief. So, you answer the question, who is my neighbor? The answer is not the religious people, who sat on every committee at the synagogue and knew every line of liturgy. The answer is the Samaritan because he showed compassion. Christians who do not respond to human need are shallow and hypocritical. That is why missions is so important.

I appreciate this church because missions are a priority. Have you ever taken an inventory of all the mission outreaches that come out of this church? The list is impressive. Several years ago, Kathryn and I took sun dresses to Haiti made by the sewing ladies of this church. Since the pandemic, they have made countless face masks to keep people safe. The Helping Hand Closet has raised a small fortune to help a variety of local people who have found themselves in need. Prior to the pandemic, the prison ministry, Kairos strived to save the souls of the incarcerated. I miss seeing that mountain of chocolate cookies. Out in the narthex sits our wooded cow, Bill Johnson. He was purchased by a Christian woman with a good heart. The money placed in the bucket in his mouth goes to the Heifer Project. They buy animals to help those living in the Third World. Thousands of dollars have been raised and countless animals have been purchased that to the generosity of this church. Annually, our youth go on a mission trip to help the poor somewhere else. We have been doing this for twenty years. They have gone as far south and east as Wilmington, North Carolina and as far west and north as Madison, Wisconsin. The Giving Tree makes sure everyone gets a Christmas present. The Warm Weather Tree helps the locals of this area stay warm during the winter months. Did you know this church gave away \$13,000 last year to missions, \$10,000 went to Christian Camp Gideon in Estonia so boys and girls can learn about Jesus? We have never had a special offering that was a failure. If there has been a natural disaster, we have responded. Your generosity is extremely humbling. I could go on, but I will not. The other eight disciples were involved with human needs. In other words, they were involved in missions. If you want this church to be what God intended, then we must be involved in missions. If you can agree worship and missions are important in the life of the church say, **"Amen!"** Peter emphasized worship! The eight other disciples emphasized missions! Do you see the balance?

The story of the transfiguration and the story of the demon possessed boy cannot be separated. Those two stories model for us the perfect balance that should exist within the life of the church. The transfiguration on the mountain represent worship. In worship, we want to experience God. The Almighty is not just pleased with worship, He expects worship. The demon possessed boy represents missions. Our world, locally, nationally, and internationally are filled with problems. God expects the church to respond to human need. In the life of the church both worship and missions are important. It is impossible to be the church God intended and not worship. It is impossible to be the church God intended and not be involved in missions. It is imperative worship and mission stay in perfect balance. For if that balance is lost, we will fall.

Nik Wallenda (born 1979) is a seventh-generation family member of the Flying Wallendas. He is a true American daredevil. He has done some amazing things to display his courage. On June 16, 2012, he walked over Niagara Falls. Tens of thousands of people gathered around the falls on that Friday night to watch him do it, and millions more watched on television. I was one of the millions. He walked on a two-inch wire that was suspended 200 feet in the air over the Horseshoe Falls. It took him less than

twenty-five minutes. It really was amazing! I have a difficult time walking on ice on my driveway. Can I state the obvious? It was vital he kept his balance.

It is vital for us to keep our balance too. To be the church God intended us to be we need both worship and missions. We need to keep worshipping and we need to continue to respond to human need. It is not just what I expect from us. It is what God expects from us. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"