



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Feb. 11, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Holy Ambiguity"

Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

9:2 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,

9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

9:5 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."

9:6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

9:7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

9:8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9:9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

"Holy Ambiguity"

There is comfort in stability.

Charan Ranganath is a professor of psychology and neuroscience at UC, Davis. He researches memory. In an interview for the *New York Times Magazine* last week, he

had this great line about memory. He said that memory “give[s] us an illusion of stability in a world that is always changing.”¹

He gives the example of a coffee shop. You go into the K-Brew off Kingston for the very first time ever. You meet a cashier and a barista you’ve never seen before. You order a coffee. This is a novel situation, according to Dr. Ranganath – you’ve never been there. But memories of going into a million coffee shops before allow you to predict what’s going to happen. You get a coffee.

But that stability could be an illusion, says this researcher, “There’s nothing that says that the barista won’t throw this coffee at [you].” Or less drastically, that they will forget your order, or spill it all over your shoes as they hand it over, or someone else will pretend it’s their order and steal it when you’re not looking. All these are possibilities.

But we like to think we can predict what’s going to happen.
We yearn for stability.

For the most part, it works. Memory is reliable, but sometimes, often-times, it isn’t as reliable as we would wish.

It’s more a painting than a photograph, says this researcher. With a memory, we’re not just recalling a snapshot of what our eyes saw. We are painting a picture, and my picture is going to look different than your picture, even as we look at the same thing.

Another example: last weekend my spouse Lindsey and I got into a minor disagreement (extremely minor, hardly worth talking about, I doubt she’ll even remember this disagreement) about our conflicting memories. She had asked off from work the beginning of spring break. I had asked off the end of spring break. Our time away didn’t line up. ‘Why did you ask off the beginning of spring break?’ I said (Because was feeling a bit cranky). ‘I gave you my preaching dates. I’m sure of it. I can remember typing out the text message to you.’ Surely, she was mistaken.

I was driving. Lindsey was in the passenger seat. She got, quiet for a minute and looked at her phone. I figured, ‘Well, that settles it.’ But this is the problem with

¹ David Marchese, “A Leading Memory Researcher Explains How to Make Precious Moments Last.” *The New York Times Magazine*. Feb. 2, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/02/04/magazine/charan-ranganath-interview.html>

modern technology. Lindsey pulled up our texts. In fact, she had given me her dates off, and I, in fact, never replied with my days off. I just thought I had.

Like, I said, minor disagreement, hardly worth talking about. Let's move on.

There is comfort in stability, but the things we look to for stability, can falter. Even our memories fail us. The truth is, this is an uncertain world: just turn on the news; just read a newspaper. And in an uncertain world, we need things we can hold onto: Places, rituals, rhythms we can predict.

That's what church is for many of us. If anything, it's predictable, it's certain. There's a rhythm to this hour, a sacred rhythm:

Prelude / announcements / call to worship / hymn / confession / scripture / TWC / sermon.

In the sermon:

Self-deprecating, relatable joke / biblical study / tie in with our lives and world
And yes, I just gave away the outline to my sermons. I do hope you'll still pay attention.

We return to this rhythm - over, and over, and over. It supports us. It brings us closer to God. Because when things go crazy out there, we come here, to something...well, to something that feels, stable.

I think that is what Peter wanted, up on the mountain of transfiguration.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the high mountain. "And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white." Beside Jesus were Moses and Elijah, speaking with him.

In the Greek, all these actions are in the passive tense. Literally, Jesus "was metamorphosized"; literally, "there appeared" Elijah with Moses. The reader is meant to see this as a divine encounter. The three disciples see Jesus touched by the hand of God, and he becomes radiant.

In astonishment of what he is seeing, "Peter said to Jesus, 'It is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'"

Because when the ground seems to shake beneath your feet, you need something solid, something to hold onto. You see something holy: you better build a temple; if he were Presbyterian, Peter would probably have formed a committee. We've got to establish order, stability.

But the thing is, life with Jesus is anything but stable.

There are only three moments in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is called the Son of God. The second one is in this passage: Immediately after Peter tries to build a dwelling place, a cloud overshadows them. They hear the voice of God, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And as quickly as it started, the transfiguration is over. The disciples are left alone with Jesus, and he walks them down the mountain.

A similar thing happens in the first chapter of Mark. Jesus is baptized by John. He sees a dove descending from heaven, and a voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." The very next verse: "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness" where he was tempted by Satan.

The final time is at the very end. On Calvary, after Jesus breathes his last, a Roman centurion stands at the foot of the cross, and says, "Truly this man was God's son."

You see, Jesus doesn't linger on the mountain-top. As soon as you get a moment of clarity, there's a wilderness to get to, or a road that ends in a cross.

Mark's point is that: *The life of faith is not lived in our comfortable certainties.* It's lived in life. And life is anything but certain.

That doesn't discount the mountaintop: those brilliant moments, when a service, a Scripture, a song, hey – maybe even a sermon, brings you in touch with the living God. But you can't stay there, no matter how much you may want to, because the mountaintop isn't all there is to the life of faith.

In fact, if you linger too long on the mountain, you might just convince yourself, that you've got God all figured out: with a creed; or a theology; or a 'this is the one right way to do church'; or a 'you can't be a Christian if you don't believe this or that.' That's Peter, all over again, grasping for certainty, grasping for a dwelling place as Christ tries to lead him forward, off the mountain.

We all like stability. But sometimes, those comfortable certainties, that once supported us, are the very things that hold us back from living the life of faith:

Somewhere, in this hour, in a church in this town, there's somebody struggling with their certainty. Because at some point, someone convinced them that the mountain was all there was to faith. They were told God could be captured in a text of scripture, or a creed, or a church. And when that stopped working, they started to ask themselves:

'Well, can I still come here, if I'm really not sure? Can I be here if I don't believe every word? Do I belong, if I struggle with the reality of God? The history of Jesus? The goodness of the church?'

In fact, I don't know this for sure, but I'm willing to guess, that's true for every church in this town – if we're being honest, there's someone in that struggle in every church in this town. And it's not just one person in each church, either; I'm guessing its several. In fact, it might even be most of us. It's might be you; it might be me.

And if it's not you or me today, that struggle is never far away, is it? It's not for me. Because at some point in my life someone gave me a mountaintop, and told me that was all there is to faith.

Debie Thomas is a minister in Palo Alto, California. This week, she published an article entitled "Metaphors for the Spiritual Life." She offered for herself, the metaphor of an onion peeler.²

She grew up in a conservative evangelical faith that said that Scripture was inerrant and infallible, and if you didn't believe that, you weren't a Christian. She found one day as a young adult that that faith wasn't sustainable; it wasn't enough. "I feel like an onion," she once told a Spiritual Director. "I'm an onion being peeled and peeled."

Have you ever felt your faith being peeled and peeled? It's not a good feeling. But sometimes, faith will surprise you, when you find what remains, after you let go:

² Debie Thomas, "Metaphors for the Spiritual Life." *The Christian Century*. February 2, 2024. <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/metaphors-spiritual-life>

I've talked before in this pulpit about one of my mentors, the Rev. Max Patterson. I knew Max when I was a college student. He was the pastor of a small church in eastern North Carolina, and I worked with him for four years as that church's youth director.

Earlier in his ministry, long before I got there, the original church building had burned to the ground.

The night that church burned down in the middle of the night from an electrical fire, Max was one the first on the scene. The manse was only a few feet from the church. He watched his church burn. He watched the fire crew get there. He watched them fail in their efforts to save it, to save any of it. Stantonsburg is a small town. In the middle of the night, the whole town showed up on the church lawn. Soon, the whole church was there.

Think of the countless services, weddings, funerals, baptisms, they had witnessed in that sacred place. How many hundreds of sermons had Max given from that pulpit? That church building had been a mountain for those people.

But I've come to notice something about the way Max always told that story. And trust me, he told me, and Lindsey, that story A LOT. Max loved to talk. He always said, as he saw the church burn, that the church showed up.

Because as beloved as it was, that building was not the church. The people who stood shoulder to shoulder that night, that was the church. That was the church, in the months following, when they met in a high school gym. That was the church in the years following, as they rebuilt.

That's the church, living together the life of faith.

- The life of faith sustained by a God who accompanies you even as you leave behind the mountaintop.
- The life of faith knit together by a love that binds you to this community, a bond stronger even than these walls.
- The life of faith sustained by the Spirit, that will not be contained.

To be the church is to point to Christ in everything we do, knowing full well that no word ever read, said, or sung in this place can be enough to grasp fully God's radiant glory.

To be the church, is to practice these holy rhythms of worship, that remind us the love of God saturates our lives and this world, knowing also that no ritual will ever fully reach the boundless depths of that love.

To be the church, is to accompany one another, in all the brokenness and uncertainties of this life, and when faith fails, we remain beside one another, because that's what Christ did.
That's what Christ, does.

When Peter, James and John saw the transfiguration was over, as quickly as it had begun, they moved forward together. And Christ walked with them, off the mountaintop. Amen.