

*Terror on the Mountain*  
A Sermon by Jeffrey P. Carlson  
St. Pauls United Church of Christ Chicago  
February 22, 2009  
Text: Mark 9:2-10 (at end of sermon)

*There may be more to learn by climbing the same mountain a hundred times  
than by climbing a hundred different mountains.*

- Richard Nelson, *The Island Within*

Today we take our annual hike up to the top of Mount Transfiguration. It's a strange and mysterious place that sounds as if it might be a place in Transylvania. We climb this mountain every year before we head into the Season of Lent. The first time I preached at St. Pauls, in 2001, I was an intern, and this was the Sunday I was given to preach. I thought it was some sort of hazing ritual for pastoral interns at St. Pauls, to drop us on top of this mountain in the middle of the wilderness and see if we could find our way back home. But I was wrong. Everyone gets their turn on the top of the mountain, to try to transfigure out this story. Since 2001 Avena has preached twice on Transfiguration Sunday, Tom three times, and this will be my fourth ascent up the mountain.

In case you are new to St. Pauls, we follow the lectionary here. The lectionary is an annual journey through the Bible that roughly follows the life of Jesus, and every Sunday has prescribed scripture readings for us to preach on. I think it's good to be told what text to preach on, because it forces me to deal with passages of scripture that I'd probably avoid if left to my own devices. In many churches, pastors choose what topics they will preach on; they do sermon series based on what they think will interest the congregation. It's a marketing approach to preaching, and perfectly understandable. We need to be relevant. The Gospel should always be relevant, because Christ is alive and walks among us. But the problem with only focusing on a text that interests me is that I am a self-deceptive soul and might avoid the texts that I really need to listen to.

And so, back up this peculiar mountain we go. A good thing about repeatedly visiting one place is that it begins to sink into you. You get to really know it, and you also notice details that a casual visitor might miss. When I was in high school in Southern Oregon, I was assigned a senior project in biology class. I was required to pick out a ¼ acre plot of land, anywhere I wanted, mark it off, and then just look at. Observe it every day from winter through spring. Just watch, notice, take notes, draw pictures, see what happens, all on one little ¼ acre plot of land. It's not difficult to find a ¼ acre plot of land in Southern Oregon, and my family happened to live near the top of a mountain back then, overlooking a logging town. So I chose a spot on the back, undeveloped side of the mountain. It was a virtual wilderness with no houses or roads, inhabited by a herd of deer. I chose a ¼ acre of oak and madrone trees, wild blackberries, rhododendrons and poison oak.

Every day for about four months I went down the back side of the mountain just to look at that one spot in nature. It was boring at first. Nothing was going on there in the middle of winter. The most exciting thing to happen was that I came down with a bad case of poison oak. But when spring kicked in and got going full blast, I couldn't keep up with all of the changes, scribbling them into my notebook. And my eyes were opened to see that mountain in a completely different way. The mountain was something living and moving. It was pulsing with hidden life right below the surface, right below my feet that I'd never noticed before. All I needed were eyes to see.

Going back to a Bible passage that you've read a hundred times before, especially a difficult passage, can be something like that. You can be struck by something you've never noticed. There's something living and moving and breathing beneath the surface of scripture that will sometimes break out and hit you right between the eyes.

Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, up to a high mountain, by themselves. But this was no self-help retreat to an alpine spa. Peter, James and John don't find helpful advice for living their daily lives or peace of mind up on the mountain. They find terror.

That's the word that struck me on this year's expedition up Mount Transfiguration. The disciples were terrified to be with Jesus. What's that all about? Nobody's scared of Jesus, are they? He always has such a kind, handsome face in the pictures. Gentle Jesus, with the lost lamb over his shoulders or the little child sitting on his knee. Who can be terrified of that? Are you frightened of Jesus? There were apparently enough people scared of him to have him executed. Jesus wasn't executed because he was a nice person. He was executed because there is something stirring beneath the surface of this man from Galilee, something that upsets our settled ways of living.

Right before they hike up the mountain, Jesus for the first time told his disciples that he had this sense that he was going to be rejected, undergo intense suffering and be put to death and would rise again, and that anyone who wanted to follow him would have to follow him in that same way of the cross. He tells them, "If you want to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake you will find it." That's not the way a successful leader talks. That's not the way that a young rising star gathers people to his cause. Whatever those first disciples wanted to get out of following Jesus, I know that it sure could not have been a cross.

What do you want from Jesus? What do you want from God? We come to God with all sorts of expectations of what God might do for us, but sometimes the gift that we are given is not at all what we're looking for but it's the gift that what we need. Jesus was not the Messiah his disciples were looking for, and he's often not the Messiah we're looking for either. James and John wanted political power. They were expecting that Jesus would be crowned king, and that they could ride into power on his coattails, that the glory of his rule would spill over on to them. They say to him, "Jesus, we want to be right there next to you when you come into your glory,

one of us on your right and one of us on your left.” They wanted to be part of his entourage, part of his glory, but they didn’t understand what that means.

Tonight human glory will be on full display at the Oscars. The bright lights, the couture gowns, the big diamonds, the big egos, the wealth, the power, the beautiful people, the stars. Do you think I’m actually going to sit down and watch that spectacle? You bet I will! Human glory will be on full display in all of its splendor, all of the things that people desire the most and the ones who have attained them. But we also know that beneath that surface of beauty and success, if you look a little deeper, is a very different story, in which money and power and beauty do not account for joy or peace.

Peter, James and John want glory. They want glory in the way that this world defines it. So when Jesus, the one whom they’ve left everything for and staked their future lives on, begins to talk about suffering and death, they protest. No, Jesus, this isn’t what we’ve signed up for. Stop being so negative. We just want to be happy.

So Jesus takes them up to the mountain to give them a true perspective on life. It’s dark. They’re alone. And it says that he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could possibly bleach them. Jesus is shining brighter than a halogen lamp, and they become terrified. Their eyes have been opened and they are seeing true glory, that all other glory pales in comparison with. All they needed were eyes that could see.

God’s glory is simply a way of speaking about the presence of God. Just as human glory surrounds a beautiful movie star walking the red carpet, and people want to get close to her, to bask in her light and be part of her entourage; God’s glory is God’s presence. It’s where God is, where God is found most fully. The story of Jesus - his life, his suffering, his death, his resurrection – that story tells us that God’s glory isn’t found where we expect glory to be – with the beautiful, the rich, the famous and powerful. God’s glory is found with little people, ordinary people, hungry people and hurting people. God’s glory is found in places of grief and suffering because that’s where God is. That’s where we find the presence of God most fully. God’s heart reaches out to where the deepest human suffering is found. That’s the blinding light that the disciples saw in the face of Jesus on the mountain. True glory.

That’s why we have to keep climbing up this same mountain, year after year. It’s easy to forget where true glory is found. We want a lot of things from God, mostly we just want God to make things better, remove our suffering, give us a little bit of success. But the God we see in Jesus isn’t a God who gives us lives that are free from suffering. Instead we find a God who enters fully into our suffering along with us. As my favorite line from the UCC Statement of Faith says, “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, God has come to us and shared our common lot.” God shares our common lot. The gift that we receive in following Jesus is not a life without suffering. The gift that we receive is the gift of his presence. He gives us his very own self, and there is nothing worth more than that.

Whenever new members join St. Pauls, we give them a candle. That candle is much more than just a sentimental gift. It's a symbol of something deeper, a deeper reality moving beneath the surface of our lives. If we could look under the skin of every follower of Christ, have our inner nature entirely exposed, we would find a blazing light every bit as bright as the light shining on the mountain, and I think we would be terrified at the sight of that glory. Sitting next to you in the pew is no mere mortal. Sitting next to you is being who is made in the very image of God and who is full of the light of Christ. All we need are eyes to see.

Jesus just took it for granted that we carry that light within us to be given away. He told us, "*You* are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others that they might see your good works and give glory to God." How are you shining? How are you bringing the presence of Christ into the places of our world that need it the most?

I've seen that light, shining right around here at St. Pauls, through ordinary people. I see that glory on Wednesday mornings, handing out lunches to the hungry. I see that light cooking dinner at the Lincoln Park Shelter or the Good News Kitchen. I see it teaching our children in church school about God's love, and I see it teaching us how to care for God's good creation and all of the mountains of this earth. I see that light visiting shut-ins, writing cards, and praying in hospital rooms. And just last week, I saw an entire choir of angels. Really. I did. Angelic beings were singing words of comfort and peace in a hospital cafeteria, right here in the city of Chicago. The glory of God is around us, among us, beneath us and within us, you and me. And I've got to say that you look absolutely glorious today. All we need are eyes to see.

Mark 9:2-10

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 clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 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." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. 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. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.