

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 9:2-9

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The story of the transfiguration follows the first prophecy of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection and his commission to the disciples to take up their cross and follow him. The transfiguration establishes Jesus' divinity, his unique relationship with God. It's like the relationship that Moses and Elijah had with God. One of the major dynamics of this story is that all of the memories associated with Moses and Elijah are brought into the story of Jesus. Jesus' transformation is thereby connected with the transformations of Moses and Elijah.

The precedent for Jesus' transfiguration and shining clothes is Moses' shining face. Moses' face shines because he has been talking with God. At one point in that story, Aaron and the elders of Israel are afraid to even speak with Moses. (Exodus 34:29-30, 33, 35) Moses put a veil over his face so that people would be able to talk to him without being overwhelmed by the divine presence of his shining face. Jesus' transfiguration is like the transfiguration of Moses. But in Jesus' story, it's not just his face but also his clothes and everything about him. It's like Moses but more so. This story also evokes memories of the stories of Elijah. When he is taken up into heaven, he is standing with Elisha and a fiery chariot with horses separates them. T

The chariot gathers up Elijah and takes him in a whirlwind up into heaven. (II Kings 2.1-18) Thereafter, the spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha. (II Kings 2.15) The implication of this story is that the spirit of Moses and Elijah rests upon Jesus.

The presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus establishes a continuity of tradition. Their presence is both their implicit endorsement of Jesus and a sign of the history of God's interventions in Israel's past history. It is also important to notice who is not present on the mountain as representatives of the tradition in which Jesus stands, namely, Saul and David, the previous "anointed ones" of Israel. Just yesterday, in the days leading up to the inauguration of Barack Obama, the U.S. government tried to create a similar dynamic. The four living previous presidents of the United States—Carter, Clinton, and the two Bushes—gathered in the oval office of the White House and were photographed talking with Barack Obama.

Jesus' shining clothes are white like the clothes of an angel, a divine messenger such as the young man in the tomb. (Mark 16.5) This first episode of the story is full of various signs of the presence of God, transforming Jesus and setting his passion in the context of divine power. His passion and death then is not about being defeated, rather it is a sign of his divine authority and presence.

Peter's response is like the response of the elders of Israel in the presence of Moses' shining face. He is intimidated and afraid. In the story of Moses, Aaron and those with

him don't say anything but if they had, it would have this same kind of quality. To be in the presence of Jesus and Moses and Elijah was simply overwhelming. Peter's response is like Moses at the burning bush who takes his sandals off his feet and hides his face in the presence of God. He is afraid that he will be overwhelmed by the immediate presence of the Holy One of Israel. Thus, Peter's words are on the one hand the words of someone who is really frightened but they are also the words of one who is in awe at being the presence of these luminaries. His suggestion that he might build three booths for the three luminaries was probably told in a spirit of awe and humility. The tradition of the booths or Succoth was related to the third pilgrimage festival of Israel (along with the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Weeks). It was a fall festival at the end of September or early October to mark the harvest. As part of Succoth, families built temporary dwellings where they would eat and sleep during the festival. Peter's suggestion of building booths may reflect an association of this story with that festival which was the most joyful feast of the year. And the booths were often built in the hills. More likely, it is told as the first thing that would come to Peter's mind.

The cloud is a sign of the presence of God. When Moses went up on the mountain, he entered into a cloud and it was in the cloud that he experienced God. He was in God's presence but God was not seen because he was in the cloud. (Ex. 16..16-18, 21ff; also Ex. 33.9-10) In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, the voice of God also comes from the cloud, "This is my son, whom I love." I've changed the NRSV translation here from "the beloved" because the words that are used in the Greek are not a title. It is a description of God's feelings about Jesus. God's words here are virtually the same words that God says at the baptism.

The voice of God instructs the disciples to listen to Jesus. God's words imply that they are to listen to Jesus because he speaks for God. When the cloud of holiness disappears, the disciples see no one anymore except Jesus. This is a sign that Jesus is even greater than Moses and Elijah.

When they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus instructs them to tell no one about this event. They are to preserve the secret of Jesus' identity until he has been raised from the dead. The promise of the resurrection is the sign of Jesus' unique status and relationship with God.

In telling this story, the first episode invites you as the storyteller to convey the wonder and awe of this manifestation of divine presence on the mountain. The story has the same tone as the stories of Moses on Sinai. The first episode is conceived on a grand scale that invokes the entire tradition of the revelation of God at the holy mountain. Peter's words are the words of one who is frightened and trying to find something to say. The words of God about Jesus are an expression of love. The end of the episode is an inside view of the disciples' experience. Tell it with their emotions, with their wonder and amazement at what they've seen. Help the listeners see it through their eyes. Finally, the conversation

coming down the mountain is an indirect discourse of Jesus telling them what they are to do, that is to say nothing about this until after the resurrection.

The impact of this story is directly related to its position immediately after the prophecy of Jesus' passion. Since that story has not been told, it is important to set the transfiguration in that context by some introductory summary of Peter's messianic confession, the passion prophecy, and the discipleship discourse. This story is a sign that the humiliation of Jesus' passion and crucifixion is a step on his way to glory. As is reflected in both this story and the stories of the resurrection, Jesus' way of non-violence is not a way of defeat but of victory.

This story invites us to make connections with our own experiences of divine presence, awe and wonder. Sometimes those experiences are related to awesome features of the earth: mountains, the ocean, the Grand Canyon. Others are related to experiences of God's presence in holy places such as sanctuaries, places of prayer or retreat, and special spots where we have experienced God. I have a deep reverence for a particular spot under the trees next to a pond at the Cincinnati Nature Center where I buried my pen and heard God speak to me. It would be appropriate for people to identify their holy places in some way during the service. These might include specific places where we saw Jesus in a new light as the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams for deliverance, health, or peace in the world.