

Transfiguration Sunday, Gospel Year B

The Ups and Downs of Discipleship

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday

Analysis by Chris Repp

2Six 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, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then 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.' 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. 9As 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.



DIAGNOSIS: Looking Up, Looking Back

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Thinking the Mountaintop is Our Destination

Peter, James, and John are the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, his A-list followers. And here they are, suddenly and unexpectedly invited to the most exclusive gathering imaginable: Moses, Elijah, and the newly identified Messiah, Jesus. These are the heroes of their people and their faith. "This is the place to be," they think, "We've arrived!"

We are like the disciples in our desire for mountaintop experiences, and in our delight and enthusiasm when they happen. We trust our emotions to be our detectors of divinity. We imagine that we "feel" the Spirit in positive thoughts and feelings.

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem) Acting out of Fear

Not wanting to lose this once-in-a-lifetime experience, Peter proposed putting down stakes. Mark says his motivation was fear. He was terrified. But of what? Was it only the sudden appearance of long-dead prophets? Or was it, perhaps, Jesus in a white robe, the clothing of martyrs? Was he remembering Jesus' recent insistence on going to Jerusalem and to his death? Was he remembering his own objection and Jesus' rebuke? Was this vision confirmation that Jesus was going ahead with the plan? Is that what caused his fear?

We too are often motivated by fear, if not terror. The downside of making it to the top is that there's no place to go but down. "One day you're in, the next day you're out," threatens Heidi Klum on Project Runway. The downside of trusting our emotions and chasing highs in our relationship with God is imagining that the Spirit is not at work when we aren't "feeling it." And so we work hard to hold on to the feeling in upbeat worship experiences and spiritual retreats.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Being an Obstacle (Satan) to God's Work

Peter's instinct here, as in the last chapter, turns out to lead him astray. Jesus had only recently characterized Peter's opposition to his mission as "satanic." In this case, the voice from heaven interrupts. "Listen to my son." Listen, in other words, to what he has already been saying. Peter's fantasy about building booths to capture the moment is yet another obstacle in the road to Jerusalem, another satanic diversion and temptation.

Our preoccupation with holding on to the feeling of our mountaintop "spiritual" experiences runs the risk of drowning out or obscuring the life-giving word that Jesus is speaking, the word that, ironically, would open the door for the Spirit to

create in us the faith we need to hear and take hold of it. Our addiction to the highs leads us instead to a dead end.

PROGNOSIS: Looking Down, Looking Forward

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Rolling Away the Stone

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death comes the rending of the temple curtain, which removes the separation between God and God's people. And on the third day, the stone enclosing Jesus in the tomb is rolled away and death is undone. This is the end toward which Jesus is leading them as they head down the mountain.

Our dead-end is not where we intended to go, but it is where Jesus meets us. We are baptized into his death and resurrection, and in that baptism, facing the worst about ourselves, we come to know the best about God: love, mercy, and life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Listening to (Trusting) Jesus

The disciples' leaving the mountain with Jesus amounts to following the Father's instruction, "Listen to him." He has already said where they are going, and now they go.

In our good weeks and our bad, we gather with sisters and brothers in Christ around Word and sacrament, whether we're "feeling it" or not, whether we are happy, sad, or indifferent because that's what we do. And in doing so we hear again the promise of God's reconciling love for us in Christ, into whom we are incorporated.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Realizing the Valleys are Where We're Meant to Be

The next episode in Mark's Gospel will find the disciples down the mountain, embroiled in the mundane struggles of everyday life that is the venue for God's ongoing battle against the forces of sin, death, and evil.

Having gathered, having listened, having been renewed in faith, we joyfully leave the mountaintop and find ourselves drawn into

the valleys of everyday life. It is there that we belong, alongside the neighbor we are called to love, and it is there that we engage the suffering, hopelessness, and disillusionment of the world by embodying the loving presence of God as the body of Christ.