

A Mountain in the Rearview

A Sermon Expositing Mark 9:2-9

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In 1913 Nils Granlund stumbled upon a good idea. He was a bit of renaissance man in the entertainment industry producing Broadway shows, pioneering radio production, and serving as publicist for the Marcus Loew chain of theaters that we now call Loew's theaters. A production of the musical *The Pleasure Seekers* was being put together for a run in New York's Winter Garden Theater. Drawing on his abilities as a producer and publicist Granlund decided to send cameras to the early rehearsals and pieced together a very short film about the production showing a few snippets of the story and some behind-the-scenes footage. A few weeks before opening night at the Winter Garden he started running his little film along with the scheduled feature length films customers came to see.

The hope was to demonstrate the power of theater in general and his production in specific *to* transport, transmute, transmit, *transfigure* audiences to another world, to capture their imaginations, their senses of humor, and their hearts for a while. But Granlund's unique goal was to create a film that was intentionally just a little too short. Just when the interest of the audience was at its peak the film would be over. To scratch the resulting itch, moviegoers would have to buy tickets to the Winter Garden Theater.

Apparently his plan worked. It quickly became common practice to play brief overviews of upcoming films and productions trailing all motion pictures. Hence the practice became known as showing "trailers." Because people began to leave before the trailers ran they were eventually moved to the start of the film and by the 60's they had been reconfigured as short, narrated montages of advanced footage. If you've seen a movie in the last 50 years, you are familiar with Granlund's good idea. He invented the preview, and they're still working to this day.

Granlund though, was not the first to stumble upon this good idea. There were probably other examples of the same thing outside the U.S. at the same time, but even those weren't the first. No the first preview of coming attractions I'm aware of was given to us in the first century and was produced by a writer who we call Mark. He tells us the story of Jesus leading three of his disciples up onto a mountainside for a preview of things to come.

It's one of the most striking stories we'll find in Mark's gospel. The events there on the mountaintop serve as a centerpiece to the gospel. All things prior are put into perspective and the tone for everything yet to come is set.

Immediately before this story Mark reminds us of the time that Peter tried to rebuke Jesus. Jesus had predicted his own death and resurrection skating a bit too close to god-like talk for Peter who hadn't yet connected the idea of divinity with his good teacher. Peter knew that blasphemy, or putting oneself in God's place, was the paramount sin and Jesus was leaning in that direction. Peter felt Jesus would need to be called out and set straight. Clearly Peter didn't understand his teacher's identity yet, not in full.

That's what the transfiguration story is all about, God revealing God's son, the Christ in the person of Jesus. Taking Peter, James and John, Jesus heads up on a mountaintop. In the first century that meant closer to

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

God, but the three disciples had no idea how close to God they would come. In unceremonious words Mark tells us that Jesus's clothes become whiter than humanly possible and he is himself *morphed, transfigured* right in front of their eyes. The first century had other examples of stories of gods and emperors suddenly glowing. In each event the point was to reveal their divinity. Mark's point is bright and clear. Peter, James, John, this teacher of yours is no ordinary teacher. His ideas are more than superior pragmatics, his vision for the future is more than wishful thinking. Standing with Moses and Elijah, those well-known precursors of the Messiah, it is clear: Jesus is no Johnny-come-lately, no rising star, he's already connected with faith history as far back as tradition will take us. This rabbi of yours standing there in radiant glory is none other than God incarnate.

It would seem that for just a moment the three disciples too were caught up in the majesty and closeness of a God who often seems so distant. We read the description of the events flatly like a newspaper description of a film coming to theaters near you. A transcendent experience of God expressed in 34 English words by the NRSV translation. But for Peter, James, and John their hearts and their imaginations are captured *fully*. Putting all that they had seen with their teacher into perspective and struggling to understand it all as the dawning of God's Kingdom had them spellbound. They didn't want the moment to end.

In those days the Greek and Roman religions built dwellings for their deities and in so doing they solidified their worship into something official. It gave access to, protected and honored the deity and with the construction of the first such tent or hut, the cult or following of that god was institutionalized. That's what Peter offered, to build dwellings for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. It was the grandest way of saying, "Oh, now we get it." The paradox was it was a *transcendent* moment of *immanence*, an otherworldly encounter of a very much *this-worldly* figure. And they wanted to live in that holy, mountaintop moment.

I've visited a few mountaintops myself. One of them looked strangely like a park bench in the front yard of my host family's home during a summer ministry internship. I'd trudged through the lowlands of uncertain calling for months and been through an exhausting time of learning the daily rigors of ministry. I didn't know with absolute certainty what God wanted from me in my life. Then I was invited unexpectedly up the mountainside. I was worn out, over worked, stressed, and had been living in a strange place for weeks. Some would say those things created my mountain – an exhausted and emotional moment, a minor breakdown. But from my perspective these things seemed merely to be my particular path up the mountain. In those five silent minutes I didn't receive any kind of foreknowledge and I didn't see any visions of the divine, but I felt a very real and profound peace. The God who was with me when I brushed my teeth that morning and who I cried out to when traffic was bad the day before morphed in those moments. I became very aware that I was in the presence and the care of the Creator. Maybe I should have prayed, but I really just sat. Or maybe sitting was praying in that moment. And then in the light of knowing that I had been with God, I took a shower and went to work. As soon as the moment had come, it was over.

I've seen other mountaintops. Some of them literally looked like mountaintops, youth camp in the rocky mountains. One other looks like the ocean. The bizarre sense of how tiny I am when walking on the beach reminds me of the grandeur of creation and the one who gathered those waters together. I suspect for some there are mountaintops in hospital rooms, in living rooms, in spacious places and very tiny places. There are mountaintops in places of worship, in nature. I wonder how many mountaintops we drive right by everyday never knowing someone met with God in that place. I wonder how many mountaintops have nothing whatsoever to do with a *place* at all. Where, or what, or when, or by whom have you been invited up the mountainside?

The answer to that question is as individual as fingerprints, but one thing is true for us all just as it was for Peter, James and John. Try as we might, we can't live on the mountain. One moment we're *enlightened* by the radiance of God's presence. We stand at a height from which we can see all of God's kingdom. All of faith history converges into a single, timeless moment of clarity. Our imaginations and our hearts are so wrapped in that we don't want the moment to end. And in the next moment we're walking back down the mountain.

A good trailer you see, doesn't tell the whole story, but just enough to let you know where the story is headed and enliven your wish to go there. Perhaps that's the entire purpose in visiting the mountaintop, to give

us just a bit of what we're working for. It's not presented in our story for this morning, but as soon as Jesus, Peter, James and John arrive back at the foot of the mountain they're greeted by a boy whose illness needs to be cast away. What's more, the overall arch of the gospel turns in toward Jerusalem, toward the passion, Jesus' death. They're right back into the thick of their everyday gospel work, but they have that mountain in the rearview.

When the mundane becomes tedious, they'll have the mountain in the rearview. When all hope seems lost, they'll have the mountain in the rearview. When we don't know what comes next, we'll have the mountain in the rearview. When plans change, we'll have the mountain in the rearview.

So may the God made radiant this day, give you just a glimpse of God's glory. May God capture our imaginations into the reality we're striving for against current reality. May God enrich our hearts with hope and inspire us with God' radiance. Then send us back with a renewed energy for God's work. And give us always a view of this mountain in the rearview. Amen.