

*Transfiguration of Our Lord*

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Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 9: 2-9)

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, 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 any more, 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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*"It's not down on any map. True places never are."* That's a line from Moby Dick, describing an island far to the west and south of New England. *"It's not down on any map. True places never are."*

We've all been to true places. Places like where you are transported when you are in love and time doesn't matter, and there's no one else there except you and that one other person. True places, like that moment when you're in the crowd and your team is about to win the championship, and you're all so focused and full of energy and passion. Sure it's in that stadium on that day, but you are also transported beyond. And, yeah, Minnesotans don't go there much, but that's a whole another story. True places, like where you go when you get the news that your dearest friend is going away, leaving you forever, and you're in that space where you can't breathe or you can't think, and everything shrinks into this one moment. True places. *"They're not down on any map. True places never are."* Today we hear about two true places, not down on any map.

In Second Kings, Elijah and Elisha are on the road. Now, in case you missed reading First Kings, know that Elijah was one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. He performed miracles. He raised a child from the dead. He heard the voice of God in sheer silence. Elijah was a big name.

Elisha (with an “s”) left everything to follow along with Elijah. He left his farm; he left his wealth. He was a wealthy man. He left his family. And for eight years he walked beside Elijah. He learned from him as Elijah spoke the word of the Lord.

And then comes the end. It’s that wrenching feeling when your best friend tells you, “I just took a job in New Zealand. I leave next week.” Or the doctor says, “If you’ve got family around, you’d better call them now.” Elijah is leaving. Elisha is devastated.

Now, of course, people come up to Elisha and say unhelpful things. “Do you know that today the Lord will take Elijah?” Elisha says, “Yeah,” and, in essence, “Shut up.” “Go away.” Then he turns to Elijah and says, “*I will not leave you.*”

There are moments in this life that are holy, moments of caring or connection that step beyond what we know or understand. “*True places, not down on any map.*” This is such a time and place. It’s marked in this telling by the Jordan River, which opens for two on the way over and one on the way back. They enter this holy space.

There are moments in this life that are holy, moments when we stand beside someone in great need, or among great changes, or among great truths.

In this place, Elisha witnessed to something that is beyond the constraints that we put on this life. He saw fire and whirlwind – things we can’t get our heads around. There is more to this life than we understand. We live within the great mystery. And all of the daily meetings and conversations and annoyances, and stuff, are held within this reality that is more big and mysterious than we will ever know. There is more to what is real than we know. And every once in a while we encounter the mystery. We glimpse beyond the ordinary. We find ourselves in a true place. And then it’s gone. The moment ends with just silence, and a feeling of loss and of questions.

Elisha returns from this true place alone. But he is changed by this encounter. He has seen the great mystery, and he brings its power back into the world.

Like Elisha, Jesus’ disciples have left everything to follow this teacher. We’ve been hearing about his work with his disciples for the past few weeks. And now today we jump ahead eight chapters in the Gospel of Mark, and a lot happened in between. The disciples have witnessed miracles and healings. They saw Jesus walk on water and still a storm. He’s fed five thousand. Jesus even sent them out to heal and preach and cast out demons. It had become a thing to be a disciple. People look up to them. This is getting good. They’ve got a following. Sure, there are the haters, but the crowds love Jesus and the disciples.

Then Jesus invites them into a true place. He starts talking about dying, about failing, about ending. And they don't want to hear it. The world is too good for them. Why would they want to give this up? It's only going to get better.

So Jesus takes them up on the mountain. No one knows which mountain; it doesn't say. It's not down on any map. True places never are. There is more at work here than they understand. More at stake than they know. There is a mystery that's greater than the crowds or the miracles. There is glory, more pure and real than they can bear. They are terrified by it.

Then a voice speaks what is really true: "*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*" "*Listen to him!*" Listen. That invitation is a game-changer, if you think about what Jesus says, what they're asked to listen to:

*"Follow me." "Do not be afraid, only believe." "You give them something to eat." "It is what comes out of a person that defiles." "Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me." "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." "Whenever you stand praying forgive, if you have anything against anyone."*

Listen to these things. This moment on the mountain invites these disciples into what is really real. It invites them into a mystery that is bigger than what they or we will ever understand. It leaves them with questions and grief for what was. But it also opens up something holy and true. "*Listen to him!*" Here is a way to start. When disciples leave this place on another path, they've heard the voice of God, and they are changed. And they're moved toward something mysterious and true.

As we enter Lent, we are invited into a place that is real and true. It's not down on any map. It's a place that doesn't look like success that the disciples were eager for. It doesn't look like keeping things the way they are, that Elisha was yearning for. It looks hard and mysterious, and glorious - like a whirlwind and fire, or like the glory of God revealed on a mountaintop.

We are invited to enter a place and a moment that will change us; call us deeper into the mystery; reveal to us what is real and true; give us a glimpse of the glory and purposes of God.

So what might that look like? Do we try to part the waters, like Elijah did; or go to a high mountain, like the disciples did? No, that's been done.

But you can think about the times when you found yourself in a true place, a place not on a map but in the presence of the Holy. Like when you were sitting with a loved one who was in pain or dying. Like when you took a walk in the woods on a winter morning, with the sun piercing through the snow crystals. Like when you first held your child and looked into deep eyes. Remember what those times were like, and wonder what God might have been revealing to you in those moments.

Another thing to try in this season is listening. Meditation is a prayer of listening, really listening. Sitting still for five minutes, or ten minutes, or sixty minutes, whatever you can. You're just listening. And when your mind wanders to the to-do list, as it eventually will, call it back with a simple word or phrase, like "beloved," or "grace." Or "not down on any map."

On any given day, all you might hear is the silence or the hum of the electronics in the room. But on any day you might feel the presence of God. Hear the voice of the Holy One.

So you can remember when you've seen true places, you can listen to the voice of God. Or you could put yourself in places where you might encounter the holy – in caring relationships, out in creation, among those in need, at worship. You won't always find the place that's not down on any map, but sometimes you will. And you're more likely to do so in some places than others.

Lent is a good time to search for those places and moments that are true, that are real and holy, to try to encounter the mystery and the glory of God.

It's a good time to try to enter that holy moment that's not down on any map. True places never are.

Amen.