

Karen Hollis – Sermon
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Mark 9:2-9 - Transfiguration

Do you remember looking through a microscope for the first time? What seemed like a small and insignificant piece of the dirt became a whole world opened to you – a world that was there all the time but you weren't able to see it. Or maybe for you it was a telescope that caught your attention. You went from seeing familiar patterns of stars in the sky to seeing a whole other place through the lens. You could see the craters on the moon, the way the rings wrap around Saturn. What looked like one star became a whole cluster. It can be life changing, realizing the world is not what we thought it was, even more so when God reaches into our lives and invites us to see in a new way.

Peter, James and John never see what is coming when they reached the top of the mountain. The Jesus they know is transfigured into a glowing version of himself, with dazzling white clothes, we're told. The disciples somehow recognized Moses and Elijah right away, who are both deep in conversation with Jesus. Their association puts Jesus in context with the Law of Moses and the great prophets of Israel, once again showing that Jesus is not coming out of nowhere. The prophets of old carved the way for Jesus to be able to fulfill his work on earth; they are with Jesus, supporting Jesus, but not equal to him, which requires some recalibration on the part of the disciples, because Moses and Elijah are among the highest revered of all spiritual leaders in Judaism.

But before they have a chance to consider what's happening before them, God comes in a cloud, descending on them. And just like when Jesus was baptized, God speaks, "This is my son, the beloved," reminding us the reader, of that moment when Jesus was marked (as we all are) as beloved of God. Going beyond God's blessing and content of Jesus' ministry, God commands the disciples to listen to Jesus. Remember, Jesus is the Verb of God, Jesus' actions are God speaking, so pay attention, give yourselves over to the Verb of God. God pulls back the veil on God's own presence and reveals to the disciples beyond a shadow of a doubt, who Jesus really is . . . a message that obviously takes some time to process when delivered by God Almighty through a voice in a cloud.

As with any of us when we have experiences of the divine, the disciples don't know what to do with this encounter. When they see Moses and Elijah, Peter, in a knee jerk reaction, tries to put it in context with something he understands, suggesting they make 3 dwellings. During the Festival of Booths, Jews make small dwellings, really only big enough to sleep in, to remind themselves of 40 years of life in the desert with Moses. It seemed like an endless time of wandering, but in the midst of it all, God moves from the mountaintop, down to where the people live. The people created a tabernacle, which became the holy place for meeting God. Even though they were between slavery and the Promised Land, and the Israelites traveled without purpose, God came near and dwelled with them. So when God reveals God's self in Jesus, one who lives with the disciples, building dwellings makes sense for Peter, at least

in the moment. Scholars say this kind of silly reaction adds to the authenticity of the story; we humans are wired to make sense of our experiences, particularly encounters of the divine. We want to make them tangible, places we can come back to again and again, carry them around in our pockets as a reminder of God coming near. These days we want to take pictures of them, frame them in our houses, put them on facebook – the way in our modern world of making sure they really happened.

But God has moved on from the time of the tabernacle; God's manifestation on earth is now in the person of Jesus, and Jesus' ministry is on the move. It's not the time to stop and make dwellings, it is the time to come down off the mountain, to the valleys where we live our lives and integrate our experiences so that we might live into the divine life God briefly revealed.

God's divine life brought forth creation and invited us into God's story, which is rescued and remembered in stories of our ancestors. The stories are still being written and will still be remembered until the end comes, whatever that may be. From God's creation in Genesis to John's vision of the end times in the book of Revelation in our Judeo-Christian story, God invites all of creation to participate in the divine life and be challenged, redeemed, resurrected and perfected in God's sight. We're co-creators in the story, while being brought back again and again to God's own heart. And occasionally, the mystery of God speaks to us in acute and unmistakable ways, throwing us into an initially awe-filled

chaos that hopefully over time has meaning for us. Some of you have shared with me experiences that fit this description. I imagine more of you have stories you could share.

I heard one such story from Delia, a confirmation student I had in the first congregation I served. She was committed to going through the confirmation class, but was very sceptical of becoming confirmed, joining the church and taking on a life of ongoing discipleship. During this season she agreed to attend the conference annual meeting of the UCC in Washington State, where in a worship service, the 400 people gathered were invited to join hands. As they stood there, all connected, Delia felt the power of God's presence. From that point forward she was all in! God revealed to her God's movement in the gathered church. It was a message she was searching for; she wanted to know this was real, and it is.

I share this story and have shared some of my own partly so you can get to know me, but also to assure you, remind you, that you're not the only one who has heard a still small voice, who has been overpowered by the presence of God, who has been reassured by a peace that surpasses all understanding, who has against all odds, been in the right place at the right time. You're also not the only one who hasn't had an experience like this – we cannot predict or control how God will reveal God's self to us. These stories are part of life with God and while I hesitate to call them normal, because we do live our lives in the valley,

not on the mountaintop, they are common, they are real, they are to be celebrated, and they request our attention.

So, if we aren't to make dwellings to memorialize our experiences, post pictures on facebook, or constantly try to relive the experience, what are we to do with them? How do we make sense of them? As Jesus led them down the mountain, the disciples peppered him with questions about Elijah and the meaning of the resurrection. Of course, Jesus swears them to secrecy about this particular experience so they couldn't talk with their friends about it, which is otherwise a perfectly reasonable response. But they also continue to be shaped by them, pay attention to where their lives are taking them, and continue to contextualize their experiences and put the pieces together as they walk with Jesus' ministry. The sum of our experiences is as mysterious as our understanding of God, but it doesn't mean we stop listening, collecting information or taking that right next step. We give thanks for God's invitation into the Divine story, praise God for the transformation we experience and continue to seek God's heart along this path of discipleship as long as we have breath to do so, and once in a while our place in it all becomes clear. Thanks be to God.