

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Outed

Dr. Jo Forrest

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At the end of the day, you may tell your spouse about a brief exchange with a barista, and your spouse notices that your face lights up. Sometimes sharing a ‘cuppa connects us with people we’d never otherwise encounter, and it makes our day.

Or maybe your kids offhandedly mention something that happened on the school bus and *voila*, in the mundane rhythm of their lives, you hear they will treat *other* kids with respect. They might not admit it, but the way they tell the story, you know that they know they’ve reached to a place of courage.

These stories form the substance of life, yes, and reflect the way we construct a life. A story is often so much more than just a story. One linked to another. One shedding light on another. Binding us to one another.

Scripture is filled with stories of people just like you and me.

As you’ve heard in past sermons, I will imagine a character’s face, hair color, and clothing details to bring them to life. It helps. And sometimes such imagining leads me down a rabbit hole.

Whenever we want a tidy understanding so we can tuck it away as solved, we either frustrate ourselves or miss the transcendence.

The artistry of the ancient authors, the poetic constructs, the social and cultural gulf between then and today, the metaphoric references, the insider language can leave us scratching our heads. Attempts for certainty may confound us or give skeptics permission to dismiss the Bible as irrelevant.

Just this past week someone said she doesn't waste time with church, even though she thinks this community does amazing work, claiming "I believe in science," implying scripture is a waste of time.

She expected me to leap to defend our holy scriptures. After several millennia and an untold number of translations, the *Bible* remains the world's best-seller and does not need my defense.

I disappointed her by saying I respect science and evolutionary biology and the discoveries of the James Webb Telescope. We need to push against the limits of human

understanding in all of these disciplines to comprehend the elements of life. And, we need to press scripture with the same curiosity, persistence, and respect for the meaning of life.

Today's story of Jesus' transfiguration perplexes readers as much as the story of Moses who stood before the burning bush and the ultimate mystery, an empty tomb.

Throughout Mark's gospel, the question of Jesus' identity constitutes the core of each story. Mark's writer tells the good news of a mysterious man.

When baptized the heavens thunder and God says, "this is my son," for only Jesus to hear. His ministry begins in baptism. Jesus calls his disciples, heals, teaches, feeds, and displays a divine charisma to attract crowds of followers. He breaks boundaries. Disrupts rigid imaginations. He concludes every event by warning, "do not tell anyone."

I'll contend, Jesus attempts to muzzle people because one interaction cannot reveal his divine purpose. In other words,

don't let first impressions fool you. He knows we cannot understand this entire grand story until we let it include us.

After years of ministry, Jesus turns and asks his disciples, "who do people say that I am?"

They mumble, "Elijah, maybe one of the prophets."

He puts them on the spot, "who do you say that I am?"

Peter says simply, "the messiah."

Then Jesus discloses for the first time that he will suffer, die, and be raised. His ministry of good news includes the cross. Through his death, God will break that boundary as well.

Then Jesus calls to the crowd that follows so everyone hears him explain: "if you think you know the way to save yourself in this life by clawing your way to the top or as some lone ranger, you will lose. But, those who give up living in selfish ways for my sake, and for the sake of this gospel, will gain their lives."

Today's story comes next. It sits at the heart of Mark's gospel. This midpoint, between Jesus' baptism and the empty tomb, is the center and the epicenter of his ministry.

God disrupts the tidy understandings Jesus' followers are attempting to construct about him.

Dear God, help our belief. Help our unbelief. Confront our dismay. Bring your spirit among us as we hear a familiar story. Help us see who your son is so we follow in his ways. Amen.

Mark 9:2-9

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 bright, such as no one on earth could brighten 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 set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one

for Elijah.”⁶ He 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 any more, 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.

It took forty years following Christ’s resurrection before the writer of Mark’s gospel pieced together all the incomprehensible stories. It took not only the resurrection, but also the witness of his followers, after the resurrection, in the way they lived and died, for this good news to make sense.

From the onset, Mark’s gospel signals that no boundary will hold. God’s voice breaks through the heavens at Jesus’ baptism.

All of the urgency of his ministry, with the same jolting disruptions, leads Jesus to a mountain top – both a geographic

place and the biblical place where the boundary between heaven and earth grows thin.

At the summit, Peter, James, and John see him ablaze, brilliant, incandescent. Light is pouring on him, and light is pouring from him.

Moses and Elijah are there as well—the great lawgiver and the prophet who was expected to precede the Messiah and now the story continues in the presence of Jesus, in all his glory. God gives them a glimpse of heaven—high up on the mountaintop, far away from the chaos and devastation below.

Then God speaks. "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him." Just as quickly, the light fades and nothing feels normal again.

At that brief moment, the disciples saw Jesus as he will be, just as he predicted, raised from the dead. Jesus lacks only one thing: the wounds of his death, the holes in his hands and side.

Peter saw something amazing but misconstrued its meaning. He jumped too quickly into speaking of the vision: Let's build a temple! Let's tell the world! He saw, but he lacked the

experience and insight to truly understand. And he was afraid. No one sees clearly when they are scared.

On cue, Jesus orders them, not to tell anyone until he is risen.

Jesus' followers are not the same after this revelation.

They come back down from their mountaintop experience into the cruel world that will kill their friend and leader, but they are changed by their experience.

Do you wonder how long before they remember that just six days ago, Jesus predicted he would suffer, die, and rise? And they too would need to choose between saving themselves or giving their lives to his purpose?

Faith does not make life prettier; it makes it meaningful.

When someone's true identity is revealed, it takes quite some time to digest who they are and who we are in relation to them.

His followers experienced this epiphany twice: once on the mountain and later when the light of an empty tomb that points back to this mystery. We know they listened to Jesus, as God instructed, and told this story by the way they followed his teachings.

“Who is Jesus?” cannot be answered without asking, “Who is Jesus to me?”—which in turn requires the question, “Who am I?”

This story radiates a mystery of God blessing him and we share that blessing when Christ claims us in our baptism.

We have no choice about dying, save the tragic instances when suicide ends a life. We have no choice, no foresight of when, or where, or how we die. We will lose our lives. We have a choice about living. Jesus’ statement about saving our lives by the way we live, for his sake and for the gospel gives us an urgency.

It is countercultural; this is the beginning of wisdom. It takes time to unpack this mystery. Its meaning grows with practice.

Every once in a while, the cloud of the ordinary day breaks with a light and we touch the miraculous – the sense that there is another world not beyond this one but within it. This can never be willed, but we can be willing for it – a willingness woven of two things: total awareness to reality and total openness to possibility.

All those little stories of our lives, like how we greet a barista or the respect our kids show others, if placed end-to-end, do they point to him?



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