

“Feet on the Ground, Head in the Clouds”
 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9
 Rev. David Hutchinson
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Some strange things happened - that day - on the mountain.

The kind of things - that EVEN - - in the - - long ago and faraway world of the Bible - - seem strange. / They seem like the kind of things that happen only in a digital animation - - or a 3-D video game. Strange - fantastic - ethereal - events.

That day - on the mountain - has come to be known as - the Transfiguration. The term refers to the report - that - the FIGURE of Jesus face - - was TRANS-formed – or “Trans-figured”. / The “trans-figur-ation” refers specifically - to the figure of Jesus - face - which we are told - was changed.

There was bright light.

Clouds. Voices. Ghosts - or Spirits.

And we could spend a lot of time - - marveling - - and wondering over the fantastic. / Or - - we could reflect on our own ABILITY to PERCEIVE God. / OR - lament our IN-ability - - as in: “nothing like that ever happens to ME”.

But I think we’ll - do all that anyway - as we hear the story.

What I want to do - instead - - is ask the question WHY. /

Why do three - of the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - - all - - tell us about it? / Obviously there is SOMETHING to it - - or they wouldn’t ALL describe it.

So - what role - do the specific events of the story play - in the Gospel?

What are the details - - and what do they tell us.

What do we learn - about who Jesus IS - - both who was Jesus to the disciples - - and who can Jesus be for us. / Because there are clues. / There are important - details.

And before we get into those details - - and we will - - I want to give you one example of what we are looking for...

After that example - - and then after looking at the details of the story - - we will be more able to answer the question of why - - and what is the point?

And I'll say right up front:

These are events that FIT Jesus into a bigger picture.

To say it concisely - - they are about perspective.

This moment on the mountain CONNECTS - past - present - and future.

The events are very DIFFERENT - - from the picture of Jesus preaching - about the poor. / "Blessed are the poor" - we read in another place. / Jesus can be seen as very human. / Earthly. / Very WITH us.

But these events are very DIFFERENT. / They are different - - from the picture of Jesus we thought about LAST week - - when he was gathered around a TABLE with sinners. / In last week's scripture readings God was very BIG and Jesus was very human.

And WE were the sinners with him - around the table.

We were the grasshoppers - - according to Isaiah.

Today - - our heads are up in the clouds TOO. / We are looking RIGHT at the big-ness of God. / Today we are up high WITH God - - as close as a grasshopper can get in this life. / And JESUS is right there with us - - otherworldly and eternal.

And so - - if we can keep our feet on the ground - - WHILE still looking into these clouds at God - - - that will be the challenge.

Now - - MY example - - of - mountain-top perspective - is actually pretty ordinary - - compared to the transfiguration. / I want to focus on the word - perspective - rather than be distracted by the light show. So - this is a description - - of the kind of experience that fits past - present - and future together - - - and focuses on - - that bigger picture.

I friend of mine once ran across the Golden Gate Bridge with a long time friend of hers. / Years ago she and her friend had made a similar run. / They remembered it as fantastic. / The amazing view from the bridge.

On this SECOND run - they had not seen each other for years - - but had kept in touch. / So - they made plans to meet in San Francisco and run across the bridge AGAIN - now ten years later - - and then have lunch after the run.

It turned out to be a beautiful day - and my friend described the run as like she was flying. / Her friend also enjoyed it - though admitted to her that as years go by - some things DO change - in terms of your ability to run and not get winded.

Nevertheless - it was a moment. / And their shared history - made the run richer - than the simple experience BY ITSELF would have been. / There was something in it about - gaining perspective on life. / Years had gone by - and here they were.

And as it turned out - she returned home to some - difficult news. / And so she went from - head in the clouds - to feet on the ground. / But she said that the bridge experience - helped prepare her for - the real life - challenges - to which she returned.

She had gained perspective on her life.

That sense of perspective - - - which is both ILLUMINATING - and FLEETING - - - IS what so moved - - and confused the disciples on the mountain.

Up and down. / High points and low points.

Revelations - and real life.

It's there in the Old Testament text as well.

When Moses went up the mountain and - received the 10 commandments - his face shined with light. / It was an epiphany. / A manifestation of God.

But then - - - when Moses came back down the mountain - his face STILL shining - under the veil - - - the people don't understand. / The text says that they were afraid.

In the reading Wendy just read from 2 Kings - - Elijah - - the prophet is taken up into heaven by God in a whirlwind on a chariot. / And yet his successor prophet Elisha wants to hold on to him - - or at least to his spirit - - here on earth.

And when the transfiguration - - happens - - there are Moses and Elijah!

So part of what happens is that the ghosts of the past show up again.

The past becomes a PART of the PRESENT.

The disciples - - in the face of their new experience of perception - - on their mountain - wanted to build booths - - and make the temporary - permanent.

Most commentators make the point that - this response is ironic. / You can't hold on to such a fleeting epiphany - - and their desire to do so - just shows that they don't really understand what they are experiencing.

But I think - that there IS a way - - for an experience like that to have a more PERMANENT effect on our lives. / The problem is when we - try to cling - - to the moment - and stop living. / THAT - is NOT the answer. /

The answer - - I believe - - is in letting the moment - - change our LIVES. / And put life - in perspective. / Past - present - and future.

And I am convinced that the transfiguration is about that kind of perspective - - because of the details:

Detail #1 - - WHO - - is on the mountain with Jesus and the disciples?

As I just said - - it's Moses - and Elijah. / And who are THEY?

They are representatives of the LAW - and the PROPHETS. / They are major figures in the past history of Israel. / They are messengers through whom God has communicated with the people of Israel.

God had made covenants - and promises.

God gave the law - as a way of life.

God warned and guided through the voice of the prophets.

And now Jesus - - is placed - - in that line. / Jesus IS LIKE Moses and Elijah. / Jesus continues that story. / Jesus is an answer - - to some OLD longings - - so says Mark - - and the other gospels - - by including them in the Gospel story.

But Jesus is also new and different. / Jesus isn't just up in the air - - like Elijah. Jesus is WITH us too.

Why do I say that? / Go to Detail #2 - - What are the words God speaks?

God says: "This is my Son - - my Beloved - - listen to him"

The question is: Does any of this - - sound familiar?

It does if you know the Bible - - because what did God say when Jesus was baptized? / Answer: nearly the very SAME words:

"You are my beloved son - with you I am well pleased"

So in Jesus - - and through our baptism - - we are connected with a promise that goes all the way back to Moses. / A promise of life and salvation. / An ancient promise.

BUT baptism is also - - about BEGINNING too. / Something NEW begins. / There is a birth - like that of a son. / A birth of something in us.

And the newness is not ONLY in the baptism image. / Jesus garments become glistening white. / And THAT - is detail #3.

To understand the glistening garments - ask yourself this: Who else's garments became glistening white? / Well - how about the angel - - in the tomb - - at the resurrection?

Could it be - that - one of the bits of perspective that the disciples got that day - had something to do with the future - and the resurrection? / Somehow - the hope of Jesus' resurrection was known to them - for just a split second - ahead of time.

I'm not suggesting this as proven - - I'm asking you to ponder it.

That's the nature of a mountaintop experience - it's about experience - - not proof.

In the best sense - - it's about catching a vision - for the future. / And then trying - somehow - to take that vision - - back into real life. /

Somehow - - we figure out how to live our faith.

In a negative sense - - the tragic events of September 11 - - were thought to be - by some people in this country - - that kind of - perspective event. / Maybe rather than a mountain top - a deep valley.

But as I look at the situation in our world today - and think about - - the issues before us - and how we live life in this country - - I sometimes wonder if we gained much perspective. / It seems to me to have been a fleeting glimpse.

How do we - let something - - positive or negative - actually - change present day - everyday reality - - for the better? / THAT is really the question!

How do we HOLD ON to an expanded perspective?

There is something about the movement of the Holy Spirit - in all this.

I have heard these stories in the mission field.

I have heard gripping stories of faith shared by people in small groups.

Sometimes at Bible study or on Monday night.

For YEARS - - people have shared their faith at Priscilla Circle.

In some small - - but real and profound way - - THAT IS what I'm talking about.

You might point to other things.

The question is: How do they change our perspective? / What are we DOING about our mission - - or about the children and families or loved ones in our lives? / How are these things affecting our plan for ministry - - and living our faith?

Are we seeking the Spirit?

Our lives - DO FIT - into the story of Jesus - - and are CHANGED by it.

Real life and ministry - - DO connect with mountain top perspective.

And our feet can be firmly planted on the ground -

- while our heads are up in the clouds -

- seeking God's vision for us.

So - - as we think about all this - - I think of some other examples - - of this mountain-top perspective - - for us to think about:

On the LAST night of his life - - in 1968 - - the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words: "Well - I don't know what will happen now. / We've got some difficult days ahead. / But it doesn't matter to me now.

It doesn't matter now - - BECAUSE - - I've been to the mountain-top.

I've been to the mountain top - - and so I don't mind.

Like anybody I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up the mountain. And I've looked over. / I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything.

Because: Mine eyes have seen the GLORY - of the coming of the Lord!"

On my desk is a photograph. / It is of Nancy - jumping in the air - while on a mountain. / We climbed it the day I asked her to marry me. / The same day we would find out her father had terminal cancer.

As the photograph is snapped - - she didn't know about EITHER.

I only knew - - what I would ask her. (Though I was pretty sure of what her answer would be - by then.) / I told her to remember the moment - but didn't say why.

And so I keep that photograph - - to remind me.

Sir Edmund Hillary - the first man to climb Mt Everest - - - also wrote an autobiography. / In the book he says very little about his climb. / He simply describes it as a "great moment".

At the end of the book he wrote: "Some paths will be spectacular - and others will be peaceful and quiet - - who is to say which is more important? / For me the most rewarding moments have been these great moments - - a tear on your departure - - joy on your return - - a trusting hand in yours. / Most of all I am thankful for the tasks left to

do. / I can see a mighty river to challenge - a hospital to build - a valley to cross - - -
there's plenty to do"

After Hillary climbed the mountain - - he created a trust fund - - to help the
people at the BASE of the mountain - - - - and he helped build 22 schools - - and a
hospital.

As we look out - through the clouds - may we too - find some perspective.

And - - may we let our lives be changed. Amen.