

THERE'S A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

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Mark 9:2-9

What is it like to be in the presence of the Lord?

When the Hebrew people had escaped Egypt and were wondering in the wilderness all those years, God called Moses up to Mount Sinai in order to give Moses the tablets containing the Law. God had settled on the mountain like a cloud and Moses approached that mountain and waited for six days. On the seventh day God called to Moses to enter the cloud. To the people below, the cloud appeared *like a devouring fire on top of the mountain*. Moses entered the cloud and remained in God's presence for forty days (Exodus 24:9-18).

At the end of that forty days, Moses returned to his people. He descended the mountain taking with him the two tablets of the covenant which had been given him by God. However, as he approached the people, Moses was not aware that his face was shining. He radiated the glory of God from being in God's presence. When the people saw him they were afraid and would not come near him. From that moment on, he wore a veil over his face to hide God's radiance.

Elijah was a prophet of God who lived about 900 BC—about 400 years after Moses. He lived during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and is known for vigorously defending the worship of God over that of the Canaanite deity Baal. Elijah was also known for performing miracles. We are probably most familiar with Elijah through the wonderful Vacation Bible School story of his defeating the priests of Baal in the great contest on Mount Carmel. The purpose of that contest was to see whose god could send down fire from heaven and light the altar (1 Kings 18:18). You will remember how the hundreds of priests of Baal set up their altar and then danced around it all day calling for fire, but nothing happened. All the time Elijah sat off to the side in his folding lawn chair shouting insults. "Maybe your god has forgotten you. Maybe your god has taken a walk. Maybe your god is off going potty." When it was Elijah's turn, he soaked his altar with barrels of water and when he called to God, the altar erupted in flames. Elijah's god was victorious.

Because of this success, Queen Jezebel sent word to Elijah that she was going to have him killed. Elijah escaped to the wilderness and ends up hiding in a cave. The word of the Lord came to Elijah in the cave saying, *What are you doing here, Elijah?* Elijah explains that he had done great things for God but now he is all alone and his life is in danger. God commands Elijah to leave the cave and go out and stand on the mountain because *the Lord is about to pass by*. Elijah goes to the mouth of the cave and he encounters a terrible wind that was splitting mountains and breaking rocks. *But the Lord was not in the wind*. And then there was an earthquake but the

Lord was not in the earthquake. Then there was fire but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire there was only *the sound of a low whisper*. That was God there in the quiet, in the stillness, in the silence. God sends Elijah back to serve again as a prophet. Jezebel does not kill him, and, in fact, at the end of his life, Elijah is carried into heaven by a chariot of fire that has been lifted by whirlwind.

In our passage for today we read of another interaction with the Lord in the incident known as the Transfiguration of Christ. This event involves Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Jesus, along with three of his disciples—Peter, James, and John—have left the crowds and the rest of the disciples and they have ascended a high mountain. While they are there alone on the mountain Jesus is transformed. He is transfigured while the others look on. Jesus' clothes become dazzling white—*whiter than any bleach could bleach them*. Suddenly, standing there with Jesus, are Moses and Elijah, and they are speaking with Jesus.

Peter realizes who is there and he presents an idea. He says 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*. Apparently, this was not the most insightful suggestion because the gospel offers this comment, *he did not know what to say for they were terrified*.

Do you remember the cloud covering Mount Sinai that called to Moses? Here, in this story, a cloud overshadows those on this mountain. From this cloud a voice announces, *This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him*.

Then, without warning, everyone is gone and it is just Peter, James, and John, and Jesus. And they head down the mountain back to join the others and continue their ministry together and their journey toward Jerusalem.

The Transfiguration is an odd story. It takes place on an isolated mountain with only a few witnesses. There is the appearance of ancient heroes, glowing garments, a voice from a cloud, the disciples' awkward proposal.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday—the final Sunday of the season of Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Lent will take us on a spiritual journey to the cross and beyond. On this Transfiguration Sunday, we celebrate the glory of God that resides in Christ. In the actual Transfiguration, we catch a momentary glimpse of the new reality in Jesus.

One of the purposes of Mark's gospel is to establish that Jesus brings something new to the faith of Israel. Jesus' message to the world is this, *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news* (1:15).

Early in the gospel when Jesus casts the unclean spirit from the man in the synagogue, the people respond saying, *What is this? A new teaching?* (1:27) Jesus' purpose is to go into towns and synagogues proclaiming the good news. The gospel of Mark is critical of the old faith and how it was not working for most people. Its

reliance on a strict adherence to the law was a barrier for people coming to God. Jesus' new teaching is that repentance is the key to salvation, not offerings and sacrifices. Moses brought the law to the people; Jesus brings the good news—something new—and he brings it with the full authority of God. The good news of this gospel is that there is a new sheriff in town. The new sheriff comes to town with a promise of hope and peace and the message that *the kingdom of God has come near*.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus stands in the face of the old ways. He blatantly healed people on the Sabbath even though it was prohibited; he associated with sinners; he questioned the authority of the temple priests. When Jesus healed the paralyzed man, those who witnessed the miracle were *amazed*. They *glorified* God saying *we have never seen anything like this*. They recognize that something new has come to town.

When Jesus goes up the mountain with Peter, James, and John, Moses and Elijah appear beside him. They are heroes of the faith—Moses, who led the people to freedom and delivered the law and Elijah, who defended God against the incursion of foreign gods. These are the ones that the people of Israel expected to return to them and to lead them. They were always on the lookout for the new Moses or Elijah. Several times, the gospels tell of Jesus being asked if he is the Elijah. No, he is not. He is something new. He is the new sheriff.

On the mountain, when the three are together, Peter offers to construct three dwellings for these heroes. We're not sure what exactly he had in mind. Was he proposing a religious museum where people could view their heroes? (If so, the concessions alone would rake in millions.) But God says 'no.' The cloud appears and the voice says, *This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!* Jesus is not co-equal with Moses and Elijah. He is the one to listen to. He is God anointed messenger.

The Transfiguration is a reminder of who Jesus is. He is God's son, he is the recipient of God's glory. This is a fact that we tend to ignore. We try to make Jesus fully human—like us—and nothing more. We attempt to explain away the miracles and deeds of power. We want him to be our neighbor down the street who is available to help us on occasion. Car won't start? He'll bring his for a jump. Lawn mower broken? He'll loan you his and won't say anything when you bring it back with an empty gas tank.

The Transfiguration is a reminder that Jesus is greater than this. He is God's son, the one we should be listening to. He comes with the power and authority of God. He is claimed by God, transformed by God, he is God's radiance, God's glory. The old ways have been set aside. There's a new sheriff in town. Halleluia! Amen.