

“In the Cloud”
Mark 9:2-9
Transfiguration of the Lord

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Ben Dorr

“Mystery” said the writer Flannery O’Connor,
“is a great embarrassment to the modern mind.”

When I was 12 years old, my grandmother—my mom’s mother—became very sick with cancer.

My family’s home was in Michigan, and my mom’s parents lived in California. My mother got a call one April day that she’d better fly out to Sacramento as quickly as she could if she wanted to say goodbye to her mother.

So we caught a flight that evening, one that would travel through the night. Because it was so late, I fell asleep right after takeoff. But I woke up a short time later and asked my mom what time it was. Just before 11pm, she said.

And I went back to sleep.

When we arrived in Sacramento, we learned that my grandmother had already died, while we were in the air. My mom asked what time, and she was told shortly before 8pm. Which would have been shortly before 11pm Eastern time, which was right around the time that I woke up on the plane.

That memory is 37 years old. It won’t go away.

My grandmother was one of the most important figures of my childhood and she helped pass along the Christian faith to me. I felt connected to her in a unique and special way.

So did I just happen to wake up on the plane right at the time that my grandmother died? A mere coincidence?

Or was that—me waking up, at that moment—was that a mysterious experience of God, connecting me to my grandmother, telling me that my grandmother was not dead, but was now alive with God?

“Mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind.”

Our text from Mark for today is SHROUDED in mystery.

Jesus takes with him Peter, and James and John, and they go up a mountain, and Jesus is transfigured, so that his clothes become “dazzling white.”

Then Moses and Elijah appear.

Then a cloud covers the disciples, and they hear a voice:

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

And when the three disciples come down the mountain, Jesus tells them NOT to say anything about they had just seen.

Would you like to explain this text for today?

The mystery in this text—

the uncertainty in this story—

it’s overflowing.

What exactly happened to Jesus on that mountain?

What does that mean—to be transfigured?

How did Moses and Elijah appear, and then disappear?

And why did Jesus tell Peter and James and John not to tell anyone about what they heard and seen?

The story of the Transfiguration comes up every year in our liturgical calendar, always on the Sunday before the season of Lent begins.

In other words, the Church considers it an important text. But it's hard to know, exactly, what's going on in this text. All that mystery...

Perhaps the most prominent image of the mystery is the CLOUD.

Did you notice that part of the story?
 “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice...”

When you're in a cloud—you can't see clearly, right?
 It's like being in a fog—there's confusion.
 Uncertainty ABOUND.

Of course, this is not the first time that God has come to someone in Scripture shrouded in a cloud.

Do you remember our text from Exodus this morning?

“Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.”

Or how about earlier in Exodus, when the Israelites were escaping from Egypt?

Chapter 13:

“So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness...The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day...and in a pillar of fire by night...Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”

Huh. That means God’s presence in a cloud is not just a mysterious experience or a terrifying experience. It can also be a reassuring experience.

Have you ever had such an experience?

I don’t mean did God appear to you in an actual cloud.

I mean—has God ever come to you in MYSTERY, in a way that leaves you with questions, yes...but also in a way that lets you know that God—the Almighty, the One who spun the planets and gave life to creation—this very God is paying attention to you?

This same God is walking with you?

The late writer Reynolds Price once observed that
 “far from being the exclusive experience of saints and mystics,
 many ...perfectly normal human beings ...share
 [what Price calls “dawnings”—
 strange, mysterious experiences—]...
and keep them secret in some desire
 to avoid the appearance of lunacy.”¹

¹ Reynolds Price, *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?*, New York: Touchstone, 1999.

And yet Price also observed that after he wrote about the two or three experiences he had had in his life, he received letters from strangers who wanted him to know that they too had had similar experiences.

A voice that seems to come from nowhere.
A dream that proves more real than reality.

Price received one such letter from an 87-year-old writer. She said of her experience:

“Mine came, like yours, at a time of medical stress, during some exhausting tests before an operation.

“I went out along the Galilee hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and then said, ‘What do you want?’

“I said, ‘Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after the tests, because I can’t manage alone?’

“He thought for a minute and then said, ‘How would it be if I came?’”²

Have you ever had a mysterious experience of the Almighty?
Please, do not misunderstand.

I’m not saying that every faithful disciple of Jesus has a mystical or inexplicable experience like what took place on that mountain long ago. Remember, Jesus only took 3 of his disciples up on that mountain.

² Ibid.

Nine other disciples stayed where they were and never saw the cloud, never heard the voice...

I am saying that what happened on that mountain long ago...in all its glory and confusion and beauty and mystery...has something to teach us about what it means to follow God in the times we live in right now.

Because UNCERTAINTY is all around us.
During the pandemic, for sure...but also before the pandemic.

For example, what parent of a tween or teenager these days has not at one point along the way thought to herself—good grief. When I was a teenager, there was no social media, there was no online bullying or canceling...how do I best address these challenges for my children, so that they can stay healthy and whole, making wise decisions for their own well-being without becoming isolated from other human beings?

In other words, how do I navigate all this uncertainty in a rapidly changing world?

But it's not just parents who find themselves asking that question these days. And it's not just the pandemic raising questions of uncertainty these days.

Have you asked yourself that question?
How do I navigate all the uncertainty that's swirling around me?

In a book that was published shortly BEFORE Covid showed up on the scene, Peter Steinke wrote:

“Digital life, recession, two wars, worries about jobs, health care, our children's safety, nature's cataclysms, a tense presidential election...extremist groups, inequality of wealth, low trust in the people in charge...Zika, Ebola, or whatever new strain of germ appears...

It all means that “uncertainty [follows] us like our shadow...”³

Have you ever asked yourself how in the world can I navigate all this uncertainty?

If you have—then I think today’s story from Mark is just the story for you.

The experience of the Transfiguration came at a time for the disciples when following Jesus was about to get a lot more difficult. A time when the ground was going to shift under their feet.

Right before our text, Mark writes:

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

This caused so much anxiety his followers that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Jesus!

Then AFTER the Transfiguration, Jesus does it again.

Mark 9.31: “...he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’”

And how do the disciples respond?

Do they say, Oh yeah, Jesus—that makes total sense, thanks for the heads up!

³ Peter Steinke, *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

No...Mark writes:

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

In other words, the story of the Transfiguration is nestled RIGHT IN THE MIDST of uncertainty, when the disciples do not understand what’s happening or why it’s happening, when the world they’ve been living in is about to start changing pretty rapidly.

And in the cloud, the message that those 3 disciples hear is this:

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

Listen to him.

Because what Jesus has been telling the disciples—before the cloud, after the cloud—is not only that he will suffer and die, not only that their lives will get more difficult.

He’s telling them that he will be raised.

He’s telling them that God will triumph.

He’s telling them that there is no event that’s beyond the reach of the redemptive and never-ending love of God.

Do you believe that?

That there is no event beyond the redemptive reach of God?

You know, some scholars believe that the Transfiguration is a misplaced Easter story. That somehow it slid into the middle of the Gospel, when it really belonged at the end of the Gospel. But I don’t think it’s misplaced at all. I believe it’s POWERFUL good news for all of us to hear in the midst of days that do not always feel like Easter.

Consider for a moment what you are most worried about right now.

What you feel most UNCERTAIN about right now.
Whether it's a loved one's health, or your own sanity,
whether it's the stability of your job,
or wondering whether you'll ever stop feeling lonely...

The Transfiguration says that God's love will be there for you.

Even when you can't see straight, God's light will come...to dazzle you, to surprise you, to surround you when you least expect...

Jayson Greene is a father who recently wrote a memoir about the grief he and his wife endured after losing their 2-year-old daughter, Greta. Greta died because a brick fell from a building and hit her—it was a random accident, something that neither Jayson nor his wife could have prevented or predicted or controlled.

There's a scene in the memoir that takes place after his daughter's death, when Greene decides to go running in a park.

He writes the following:

“There at the park's mouth, my heart stirs, and I feel a peculiar elation. *I recognize her*. Greta is somewhere nearby. I feel her energy, playfully expectant. *Come find me, Daddy*, she says. Tears spring and run freely down my face. *I hear you, baby girl*, I whisper. *Daddy's coming to get you*.

“Elated, I enter the park and immediately spot her; she is waiting for me, hiding behind the big tree in the clearing between

the...playground and the duck pond. She appears from behind the tree with a flourish, giggling...

“Standing in the park, staring at her, I make a strange...sound, deep and rich like a belly laugh, hard and sharp like a sob. *You are here. You picked the park. Good choice, baby girl.* Oblivious to the people around me, I run to her. She wiggles in anticipatory joy. Stooping down, I scoop her up...her shoulder blades meeting at the pads of my fingers, and I lift her up into the sky.

“She is invisible to passersby — to them, there is nothing in the spot next to the tree where she stands laughing and clapping but a patch of grass, and there is nothing in my arms but air.

“But she is not here for them; she is here for me...

“I bend my arms and lower her face down to mine and kiss her, slowly. Then I set her back down in the grass.”

In reflecting on that experience, Greene writes:

“I feel like I’ve discovered an opening.”

“I don’t know quite what’s behind it yet. But it is there. I am [in] a new and unfamiliar kind of [place]. I have been raised secular by my parents, and I’ve never set foot in a church for more than an hour.

But I will do anything for Greta, I am learning. And that includes becoming a mystic, so that I might still enjoy her company.”⁴

Now what happened to Jayson Greene in the park that day?

⁴ [Jayson Greene Memoir, ‘Once More We Saw Stars’: Book Excerpt \(vulture.com\)](#), and [Grieving the Death of a Child in ‘Once More We Saw Stars’ - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).

Any one of us could say, well—that was all in his imagination—not that that’s a bad thing. It’s a good thing, because it was the way he needed to deal with his grief at that moment.

Perhaps that’s true.

But there’s another possibility.

That his experience in the park was not in his imagination...
but was in some inexplicable way REAL.

That his daughter, by God’s grace, came to him that day.

Maybe that sounds foolish.

Does it sound foolish?

Because the God we know in Jesus Christ is a God who has power over death itself.

A God who has the power to heal our deepest wounds.

A God who redeems the most broken places in our lives.

A God who is with us, even when the ground has shifted, even when we’re walking through uncertain times...

I believe God gave Jayson Greene a gift.

Just like I believe God will give you a gift.

A gift that will dazzle you, astonish you, a gift you will never see coming...

Amen.