

**THE MISSION OF JESUS**  
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Transfiguration Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Mark 9:1-29**

*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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And suddenly there was Elijah with Moses, talking with Jesus. Then Peter said, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly they looked around, and saw no one but Jesus.*

The lectionary lesson officially ends there at verse 9. But I've extended it to verse 29. For the story on the mountain should include what happens next in the valley. After showing us a transfigured, beloved son of a proud father on a mountain, the gospel next shows us a distraught father with a disfigured son in the valley. Jesus looked upon that child and ordered the demonic force within to depart.

*Later, when Jesus had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast that demon out?" And Jesus said, "That kind can come out only through prayer."*

To which I would add, *and only if you know what kind of prayer Jesus is talking about.* We'll get back to *that kind of prayer* but first let's consider what's going on with Jesus, Moses and Elijah together on a mountaintop.

This past week I've been reading a book by New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. As most of you know, Borg died last month. He was a major influence on my – and many of your – understanding of Jesus and Christianity. I learned much from his previous books, especially *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *The Heart of Christianity*. Each of my past two sermons, "The Faith of Jesus" and "The Healing Touch of Jesus" has drawn on Borg's insights as does today's sermon: "The Mission of Jesus."

I'm not completely happy with the title: "The Mission of Jesus." It can conjure up *missionaries* sent to convert the heathen or the notion that Jesus was out to change the world with some big plan or massive global movement. But "The Mission of Jesus" is the phrase Borg prefers over the more conventional title: "the public ministry of Jesus," which connotes "religious or churchy activities." The mission of Jesus was much broader than that.

Many of us grew up with a certain notion of the mission of Jesus. It goes something like this.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a far, far away realm, the heavenly father called his beloved son in and said: I have a mission for you. And thus the son was sent to earth on a mission in a human disguise not unlike Superman's arrival from outer space. That, of

course, makes Jesus qualitatively different from other human beings – pretending to be human but knowing he’s got secret powers and knowledge that no one else does.

It’s a childhood and childish image of Jesus. But first impressions are often lasting impressions. And many of us have difficulty outgrowing it.

That’s where Borg and other scholars can be helpful by reminding us that Jesus was a child born to a Jewish mother and raised by Jewish parents in a Jewish society. He practiced the faith of his ancestors but not uncritically.

According to our best scholarship, Jesus embraced both the mystical and prophetic aspects of Judaism, namely deep and profound communion with God as well as bold resistance to tyranny and oppression. But unlike many young Jews of his time, Jesus refused to take up the sword of violence against the brutal Roman oppressors. The sword of violence was a real, existential option in that time and place for Jewish young men.

Jesus was a Jewish young man. He rejected the way of the sword.

Out of profound communion with God and deep engagement with his inherited tradition he eventually discovered his mission. It was, in part, a response to a call, something tugging upon his heart not unlike how we discover our own calling or vocation in life – or for just a day or for one particular situation.

The voice of love awakens us, saying in so many words. *I am hope for the hopeless.* We hear the voice and know it as our own.

And that brings us back to the gospel lesson for today.

Jesus stood on a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah – the two most powerful legends in Jewish tradition. The mission of Moses – 1200 years previously – had been to liberate the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt and form them into a community of free souls – not an easy mission.

The mission of Elijah – 900 years previously – was to oppose and resist the tyranny of the wealthy and powerful over the poor. According to legend, both Moses and Elijah discovered their mission in communion with God upon a mountaintop. They were servants of God but both had bloody hands. Both resorted to violence to accomplish their good ends.

And now Jesus is conversing with Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop. The disciples were dumbstruck. *This is great. Let’s stay here forever. Let’s build three shrines for these three holy icons of sacred power.*

But Jesus would have none of it. His mission was not to be worshipped. Only God should be worshiped, he said. His mission was not to start a religion or be idolized.

The mission of Jesus was to bring healing and hope in the way of Moses and Elijah, not by imitating them exactly or by reenacting the past, but by moving forward into an unfolding future. And that, in part, is how we practice the faith *of* Jesus – not faith *in* Jesus. We practice the faith *of* Jesus!

*Let’s get off this mountain; there’s work to be done in the valley.*

And sure enough down in the valley was a father with a disfigured and tormented son, an intentional contrast to the beautifully transfigured Jesus on the mountaintop. “Will anybody look at my son? Does anybody care about him,” cried the distraught father?

Consider this, if you can: The transfigured son on the mountain and the disfigured son in the valley are both Christ, both children of God.

“Bring him to me,” said Jesus knowing he was meeting himself. And just like that Jesus drew whatever ugliness was degrading, demeaning, distorting, disfiguring and destroying that child – drew it out and set him free from tyranny and bondage.

WOW! exclaimed the disciples. How did you do that? And Jesus replied, *that kind can only come out through prayer.*

And that’s where we must be careful. We must pay close attention lest we assume that we can cure drug addiction, mental illness, social bigotry, poverty or war if only we utter the right prayer with the right words and the right intensity.

Jesus is not speaking of *that* kind of prayer. This is not prayer as words addressed to a supernatural powerful being that intervenes and saves some if only the prayer is right.

This is prayer as paying attention to the world in which you live – not as a casual observer, but as deeply connecting what you see with the compassion in your heart.

When we look in prayer upon the world of brokenness and pain around us and ask why, something awakens and often leads us to serious thinking, or to research, or to study and education; it could lead to creative endeavors, even political actions that may, just may, help bring healing to broken people, communities, institutions and the world, including the church.

I had another sermon in mind for this morning. It would have been titled: “The Prayer of Jesus.” But it would have been very short. Just one sentence. *Prayer is making contact with love that burns in our hearts.* (David James Duncan)

It puzzled me when I once heard a certain astronomer say: *When I’m looking into the galaxies, I feel like I’m praying;* or a certain scientist say: *When I look through the microscope searching for a cure for cancer, I feel like I’m praying;* or a certain relief worker say: *When I process refugees into a camp, I feel like I’m praying.*

I used to not get that because it wasn’t prayer as I had thought prayer should be – talking, you know, asking for things. But I get it now. I get that kind of prayer.

And I think you get it too even though it’s not easy to get given our deeply entrenched notion of prayer as talking. Prayer is talking but it is also – if not mainly – paying attention to what’s going on in your world, in your own heart and with the people and situations around you. When you connect your looking with your loving you are communing with God; in such communion, a mission may be born out of a voice saying something like this: *I am strength for the despairing, hope for the hopeless, healing for the lame.*

If you’re paying attention you will hear that voice and know it as your own. After all, All is one and Love is All. Breathe in God. Breathe out love.