

**2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**  
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There are moments in life you wish would last forever: watching a gorgeous sunset on the beach, crossing the finish line first at the track meet, walking down the aisle with your father, welcoming your child into the world or holding your grandchild for the first time. These are special moments, precious moments, sometimes once in a lifetime moments, and you can't help but want to stop time.

For Peter, James and John, their trip to the mountaintop with Jesus was one of those once in a lifetime experiences. Of all the people Jesus could have taken with him, only they were privy to that extraordinary moment when heaven and earth touched, up there on the mountain.

Even though they were terrified and didn't know how to respond, Peter knew this vision was something he wanted to hold on to. He wanted to stop time, so he suggested building a place right there for each of them to stay: Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

But it was not in the cards. Almost as suddenly as the vision came upon them, it was gone.

And then a cloud settled over them and a voice from the cloud spoke to them. "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him." God had called Jesus the beloved at his baptism, but only Jesus heard those words. This time, God is speaking to the disciples. "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him."

I wonder what they thought. Maybe they heard what God said as encouragement: yes, Jesus really is who you think he is; trust him and listen to what he says.

They could use some encouragement about now. Jesus' ministry has not always been welcomed. If he were the long-awaited Messiah that everyone was longing for, you would think his arrival would be hailed as good news by everyone. But it was not.

"This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him."

Maybe the disciples were encouraged by these words but they were also challenged by them. Was God chastising them because they haven't been good listeners? They have a knack for misunderstanding him, so maybe God is commanding them to pay better attention.

The issue, as Jesus himself explains, is not really about listening. No one can fully understand who Jesus is or what he is saying until after the resurrection. What Jesus is saying about himself and where the path is leading him is completely incomprehensible to them right now.

That is because they were expecting a great political leader, a ruler of royal lineage, one who would lead his people in victory over the Roman oppressors. And Jesus didn't come to lead that kind of revolt and would not lay claim to that kind of throne. Instead he traveled the countryside, teaching and healing and proclaiming the good news of God's love.

He demonstrated that love by associating with people who were outsiders: he healed lepers; he called out unclean spirits; he ate with tax collectors and even with women. He healed on the Sabbath, he stilled storms, he challenged the religious leadership. Some people liked what he was saying and doing, but many did not.

So, as they went from village to village, Jesus tried to tell his disciples how it would all go down. Just before their trek up the mountain, he had told them how he would undergo great suffering, be rejected and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Peter had insisted it couldn't be true. Not you, Jesus. This cannot happen! And Jesus had scolded him. Get behind me, Satan, he said. Your mind is set on human things, like wisdom and power and strength. But God does not operate according to our ways. Instead, as the Apostle Paul writes,

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.<sup>1</sup>

No matter how much we might wish it, God is not revealed in clever speeches or triumphal theologies where there is no room for human pain and suffering. God is not revealed in human power and wisdom. God is revealed in the humiliation and suffering of the cross.

So, who can blame Peter for wanting to create a freeze frame of the glory moments? Who wouldn't want to stop time if it means avoiding the harsh realities of life: of war and death, poverty and suffering? Who doesn't want to hold on to the moments of splendor?

Here they are, encountering the Messiah of God revealed in Jesus, his clothes blinding white, flanked by with Elijah and Moses, the superheroes of their faith. It couldn't have been a more transcendent moment.

"This my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

"This is my Son, the Beloved. He will suffer and die."

But Messiahs aren't supposed to suffer and die. They are supposed to be strong and powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 1:27-29.

But here's the thing.

Seeing God as vulnerable is not a denial of God's power but the very essence of it, reaching out to us in those places where we find ourselves broken and battered and without hope. And for us, this is the good news. For "to know in the midst of ... our suffering ... that someone always understands ... helps us to bear it."<sup>2</sup>

One week after his son's untimely death, William Sloan Coffin, Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, preached a sermon in which he named the ways in which he had been supported in the intervening week. His son had died on a rainy night when his car plunged into the Boston Harbor on his way home from a tennis game.

After railing about how completely unhelpful it was to blame his son's accident on God's will, Coffin said. "My own consolation lies in knowing ... that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."<sup>3</sup>

In the words of theologian William Placher,

God suffers because God is vulnerable and God is vulnerable and willing to come into the world to share our pain because God loves.... God can help because God acts out of love and love risks suffering. A God defined in terms of power is ... not a reliable rescuer, because power ... does not guarantee concern, and power, in the way most cultures have most often used the word, [including our own] too often grows out of a fear of vulnerability that makes reaching out in love ... impossible.<sup>4</sup>

The disciples have been with Jesus for almost three years now, hearing him teach and share God's love with those he encounters, but they won't fully understand the power of God's love until after Jesus' death and resurrection.

But let's be honest, we live on *this* side of the resurrection and even now, we don't fully understand it.

Like the disciples, we, too, are looking for God's power in the wrong places, through the human lens of power and success rather than God's. What if we looked instead in the places where God tells us Jesus is, places of suffering and hurt?

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<sup>2</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 18-20.

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, "Eulogy for Alex" ([http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript\\_eulogy\\_print.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/printable/transcript_eulogy_print.html))

<sup>4</sup> Placher, *Ibid.*

With forgotten hurricane victims;

with people left behind in the economic recovery  
or devastated by addiction;

with families torn apart by deportation;

with children living in the crossfire of war;

with the family of Austin Crowe.

God is there, with those who are hurting. God is here, with those of us who are hurting.

We may sense the presence of God in the beauty of sunsets and the mystery of mountain top visions but, in Jesus, God promises also to be present in the messiness of human life and death.

Peter and James and John do not understand this yet, which is perhaps why Jesus asks them to keep this vision to themselves until his work is complete. Then and only then, will they come to know that God is holding onto them and will never let them go.