

# Sermon Text for February 11, 2024

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## *II Kings 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9* *“The transfiguration of Jesus”*

On January 12, 1986 I heard the voice of God. I know, not a super common way to begin a sermon especially within a traditional Presbyterian Church. I was an atheist, a senior in high school, didn't believe in God and let people know about it, but God spoke to me and said: “Stop living for yourself.” Then he gave me a vision of what my life would be like for the next dozen or so years. I want you to work for me. I deferred from college, took a gap year and went to Philadelphia College of Bible for a year, went to Swarthmore for undergraduate, Princeton Seminary for graduate school and took off for the mission field in Italy, fulfilling what I believed was God's calling on my life. It was one of those defining moments in my life where I can clearly say that I experienced the presence of God, and I mean the full presence of God. It changed my life forever and for eternity.

We each experience God moments in our lives when we realize that God is actually the one directing our lives, or in charge, or we come to some other conclusion at that moment. Maybe it is when you had your first child, or a highly intense experience where something that you can only define as a miracle took place. Take a moment to think about a time that you had what you would call a God moment in your life, where were you, what was happening in your life. There is actually a technical term for God revealing Himself to us and it is theophany, yeah, that's not super important, but there is one.

Now ask yourself the question what did I do with that God moment. Like, how did it change my life, or did it at all? Is it just another one of those life experience that we categorize as interesting but not really transformative. Maybe it solidifies the fact that you actually believe in God but this whole institutionalized religion thing is a bit off putting, I mean after all, look at who they let preach on Sunday mornings, present company included. Hypocrisy is what drives people away from the church more than anything else. Why would I want to be a part of something that can't even keep their own people in line and where sin is so obviously in their midst. You can say that of any church on the face of this planet.

But what about your own God moments? What happens to them if you don't at least try to contextualize and understand them with other people who have experienced and aren't afraid to talk about how maybe, just maybe, God has something to say for us and God actually does

have a plan for us and our lives. Each of our Scriptures this morning contain clear moments of experiences where God manifests Himself clearly, very, very clearly.

We see in these experiences a reaction of fear which can blur our resolve and our sight and our understanding of what we are to do next. We see that culture in our own context is wired to lead us inexorably away from these God moments to classify them as chance or luck or coincidence. But instead what we are called to do is to listen and follow that which God manifests in our lives when he tries to get our attention in a very clear and direct way. Let' read.

### **READ**

This Sunday, aside from being preschool Sunday, and also aside from being Souper Bowl Sunday, this Sunday which is the last Sunday before Lent begins, which is this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday, is called Transfiguration Sunday because of this Scripture that we read. Traditionally the historic churches have followed this in their liturgical calendar as the Sunday that we preach on when Jesus was transfigured in front of his disciples and with the presence of Elijah and Moses. So, that's where we find ourselves with our Scripture this morning.

The disciples up to this point have had so many different God moments with Jesus. This is near the end of his ministry. For three years they have been living and eating and breathing with Jesus. So they have already experienced the myriad of God moments from miracles and healings to the calming of the storm and the feeding of the 5,000. Think of all the things that Jesus did in his life which clearly reflected the presence of God and that anyone present would be able to say, this is God at work. These disciples have had a lifetime of moments that for any one of us would be life changing and transformative.

But today was different, he takes with him up a mountain Peter, James, and John and while they are there the Scripture states that he was transfigured which is a fancy way of saying that he changed, he became dazzling white. We see something similar in the Old Testament when Moses meets God and receives the 10 commandments and he comes down from that mountain with a dazzling white countenance. Like I have been saying, there is something that happens to you when you experience God, when you see him face to face, or even as simply as when you know that you have just had an experience where God was present. You remember that and it ought to change you and impact the trajectory of your life.

In our first reading today Elisha, the apprentice of Elijah, sees him taken up into heaven and it completely changes his life. He receives the Spirit of the Lord and takes over as the prophet of the Lord. When we gather in this place, and it is not exclusive to this place, but it is this place also, when we gather we believe that God manifests himself in a unique way when we

worship and give praise to him. You have been called here today for a reason, we believe that, and we hope and pray that it will be impactful and even transformative for you today. We hope that you make decisions as a result of today that will impact your life, your marriage, how you raise your children, who calls the shots in your life as a family. This is what we do together and not just on Sunday morning. This family here in this church believes that God reveals himself to us in a way that changes our life.

But it does take a community to encourage each other and to be able to walk with each other to interpret and understand how God is speaking to us. In our first Scripture Elijah, the mentor to Elisha, tells him to stay behind, but Elijah says no, three times this happens and three times he insists on staying with the man of God. We see a similar story in Ruth and Naomi where Naomi tells Ruth to leave her and she says no, some of you will remember this verse, she tells her: Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you. Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Each of these people decide to follow God and to put themselves in a position where God is able to speak to them clearly. How are we doing that? What are we doing in our lives to expose ourselves to the presence of God? Maybe just as importantly, especially on this preschool Sunday, what are we doing to expose our children so that they can experience these transformative moments with God. I have told the church that some of my favorite moments of the week are when I get to spend them in chapel with your children. I love to teach how God is at work. Each of our Bible Stories we end with a cheer because I want the kids to know how much God loves them. The Scripture is clear that God has a preference and priority for children and that in many ways we ought to emulate their faith.

But chapel once a week, or once a month, is not nearly enough for your kids to get a full glimpse into how God is able and wants to work in their lives. This is why we do what we do. Our characters today find themselves in the presence of God either because they insisted that they wanted to be or they made a decision to be. It takes a decision on our part to want to be in the presence of other people who are seeking out the presence of God together. That's what it takes.

When Peter is confronted with the very clear presence of God, Jesus changed, Elijah and Moses showing up, even with all the experience of all the other God moments he had with Jesus, this was different. This was like nothing else he had experienced before and so he was afraid. When we act out of fear, or make decisions out of fear, well, then we don't really have our best self do we? Recently someone close to me had their first baby and when I was speaking with

them she told me something interesting. She said that she felt like she had changed into a momma bear. She was the most chill person I had known up to this point. Nothing rattled her, she just kept going with the flow no matter what was happening in her life.

But once this baby was born that came out of her and was hers, every little snuffle, or strange sound that it made, and newborns make a lot of strange sounds, it created a little more anxiety within her. She found herself almost obsessed with this fear that something might happen and so she had to be super hyper vigilant. Her interactions with people changed from a super chill person to someone who was totally focused on protecting her child, again, based up on a fear that something might happen, could happen.

Being terrified creates a new us and at times it limits our ability to listen to God. This was certainly the case with Peter here. Peter's response out of fear was let's do something, anything, even if it is the wrong thing, at least we are doing something. Jesus, good thing we are here, he says out of his fear, because we can build booths. During Covid we saw a lot of that, a desire to do something, anything, because we simply didn't know what else to do. So what we did at times could have resulted in a culture that was even more fractured and divisive than before. But at least we are doing something, right? But God tells Peter, you don't tell me what you are going to do, I'm going to tell you. Listen to him.

In the midst of our fear and uncertainty we are not wired to just watching and listening to what is happening in front of us, or even waiting for the walk down the mountain. Let's do something even if it is not what God wants, at least we are doing something, tends to be our response. But Scripture, and certainly this Bible story, makes it clear that God will make things clear if we would only listen and stop talking and stop thinking that our doing is going to force God to do something Himself.

For Peter, it is more than just cluelessness. There is a deep ignorance of who Jesus is and the role that Jesus ought to play in our lives. So what we do is hedge our bets, we do that which we think will win us to God's side. But he tells us simply, just listen to me. When God speaks to Peter, he doesn't condemn him and embarrass him, he is redirected and given clear direction in a very confusing and scary time for him. People, we are not condemned by God in our mistakes, but we are given guidance on what to do next. And when that happens and we listen to him, we leave that experience changed.

The Scripture ends with three words that have been our motto here over these past 192 years, if not at least these past 13 years that I've been here. "But only Jesus." Only Jesus is what drives us and motivates us. Only Jesus requires that we love God and love our neighbor. Like

the three disciples we experience the presence of God in powerful ways and often we misinterpret that experience or we don't apply it to our own lives. It remains a mountaintop experience but doesn't go beyond that to application. But only Jesus gets squeezed out with the frenetic pace of life that we live.

We might even be like the disciples frightened by the appearance of God in our lives and confused by it because we hear God is calling us to suffer, die and rise in following him. All that seems like so much more than the cultural Christianity we have seen around us. This Sunday you are here purposefully putting yourselves in a place where at least we profess God and look for ways in which His presence intersects with our lives. I pray that this week you would consider what it means to experience God and how you might be able to put yourself and your family in a setting where you can more frequently experience him, and understand that experience, with others on the same journey. Amen.