

Transfiguration of our Lord

February 14, 2021

## **In-Between Worlds**

### **Mark 9:2-9**

As we read this passage, we might expect a little girl named Alice to take our hand to walk with us through the Transfiguration. We don't see a dormouse. No one invites us to a tea party. Nevertheless, we seem to have fallen down a rabbit hole. Everything points to a kind of Wonderland, where things don't happen the way we expect them to happen.

After Jesus and three of his disciples climb a high mountain, we receive our first clue. Jesus' clothes turn "dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." We watch a scene unfold on earth, but Jesus doesn't dress for this earth. No matter how much a launderer soaked and pounded the wool Jesus wore, he would not be able to bring out that level of brightness. Jesus' clothes tell us that all this takes place in a wonderland, on earth, but different from earth. Those dazzling clothes point us beyond earth. On this occasion, Jesus did not dress for this earth.

If the Transfiguration doesn't make much sense to us, does life on this earth make sense to us either? We can see some predictability, but there's much that we would call "senseless." Does war make sense to us? Do shooting sprees make sense to us? Does the Holocaust make sense to us? Does slavery make sense to us? Does random vandalism make sense to us? Does

social-media shaming and bullying make sense to us?

Many of our best efforts to put on our work gloves and make this earth better seem to leave our hopes crushed. We could take one example. Poverty seems remarkably tenacious and intractable. Poverty hurts the bodies, minds and souls of children. With all our resources, can we not end poverty? Yet, within the United States, poverty defies our efforts to put an end to it. Rather than make progress, we have fallen further behind. The income gap between the rich and the poor has grown larger in the last 50 years.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, some things about life have improved in the last half century, but income inequality has not improved. We live on this earth, but it is not getting better.

We can tell that the scene on the mountain does not take place on this earth, starting with Jesus' clothes. They become dazzling in a way that does not occur on this earth. The rest of the story doesn't sound like this earth, either. Elijah and Moses show up. Two men who died centuries earlier carry on a conversation with Jesus. Elijah the prophet carried on a remarkable ministry within the narrative world of First Kings. He brought a boy back to life. He defeated the prophets of Baal in a dramatic contest to see whose deity could produce fire. He brought a drought to an end. He confronted King Ahab about the ruler's corruption. Elijah served as a model for a prophet who brings life and speaks truth to power.

Moses at first reluctantly answered God's call to challenge Pharaoh, but he ended up leading the band of Israelite slaves out of Egypt. He learned as he

went, and he became the leader who guided the people through the wilderness.

Through Moses, God gave the people the law, the instructions on how to become the people they were called to be.

The great prophet and the great lawgiver come back from death to appear at the Transfiguration. Jesus' clothes do not belong to this earth. Elijah and Moses no longer belong to this earth. Wherever we are at the Transfiguration, we are someplace only God can create. God's past actions in the law and the prophets come together to support what God does in the Transfiguration.

To cap everything else off, the voice of God speaks clearly. Clouds are part of this world, but they usually don't carry voices. In this world, we often wonder about God's presence. We might often wish for God's clear voice — when we want assurance, guidance and comfort — and we wish God would speak clearly. Here at the Transfiguration, God speaks unmistakably, telling the three frightened, befuddled disciples that Jesus really is God's Son and that they should listen to him.

On this earth, we struggle to live up to the example and the message of the prophets. We do not have their courage. We do not have their eloquence. We do not fight for justice as the prophets taught us to do. We do not seek to learn from the law that God gave through Moses. We do not open our hearts

for God to write his laws inside us. We do not reflect on the Ten Commandments to guide our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

We do not hear the word of Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves. This earth is marked by our neglect of the law and the prophets. But at the Transfiguration, the lawgiver and the prophet come alive in the presence of Jesus.

The gospels present this Transfiguration story from Jesus' life that we struggle to understand. We know, starting with Jesus' clothes, that the scene doesn't represent anything that happens in normal life and that it doesn't reflect the world we live in. This scene is not of this earth. The scene happens during Jesus' lifetime, so we have not arrived at the resurrection yet. The Transfiguration is not our world, but not quite the full completion of God's restoration of the creation either. This scene is an in-between experience. We are not in this world, but we are not in the kingdom of God either. For a brief moment, the divine world intersected with our world. Jesus wore the same clothes that he wore in this world, but they dazzled like no clothes in this world could dazzle.

Perhaps this scene is a promise. If we cannot solve all of our problems, if we strive to create a better world on our own but feel frustrated that we cannot accomplish it, maybe this scene from the life of Jesus tells us that God hasn't given up on this world. Life in the resurrection awaits us, and God has more

in store for us today! For now, we live in this world, where our clothes do not dazzle, where we must clean them ourselves. But this scene gives us enough hope that God entered into this world, and it provides us a brief glimpse of something that awaits us.

In this scene, the law and the prophets come together. Death gives way to life, as Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus. God is fully present.

The incident ended as quickly as it began. “Suddenly,” all the elements of this scene went back to normal. The disciples found themselves fully in this earth again. The disciples had to go back down the mountain. Even though they felt terrified by the experience, they wanted to stay. Even with the fear, the reality of God’s presence made the time worthwhile.

As we finish watching you-tube this morning, we will go back out into the world as we have always known it. But we go with a vision of Jesus’ dazzling clothes, as no one on earth could bleach them. We go with the promise that the resurrection lies out there, where life overcomes death, and where God will be fully present to us.

No launderer could bleach Jesus’ clothes to look as white as they did in the Transfiguration. Jesus did not dress for **this** earth in that scene. We go back out into our world of pain, poverty and the frustration that we cannot seem to fix what ails us. But we go out in hope. We go out knowing that for that brief moment, the divine world came into our world. Let us go out with

courage to tackle problems like poverty, like racism, like the cruel way people treat each other, even if our efforts do not pay off the way we want them to. We don't give up.

If God chose to come into this world, even if for only a moment, then this world, with all its problems, can be a place for God to make the divine presence known.

Let us look for the ways God is still with us, for the ways life triumphs over death. Let us go out with the courage of the prophets, with the teachings of the law to make our difference. Let us go out in hope, even if we will never see clothes that dazzle like Jesus' clothes did. We go out with the assurance that Jesus has not given up on us or on our world.

<sup>1</sup> "U.S. Income Inequality at Highest Level in 50 Years, Economic Gap Growing in Heartland," U.S. News, September 26, 2019.