

Psalm 50:1-6  
Mark 9:2-9

“When  $2 + 2 = 5$ ”

R.P.C.  
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Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

I fully expect that a number of you have come here this morning, hoping to receive something from the sermon that is relevant and practical. You are probably here in part because you want to be told something that you can apply directly to your everyday walk with Jesus – something that will connect you and your faith with the “real world” in which we all live.

When I was in seminary, I remember being told by one professor of preaching that, “Every sermon ought to end with something specific that the congregation ought to BE or DO in response to the sermon.” Like a number of things I was told in seminary, I have come to question this sermonic advice. I know that we practical people like sermons that we can readily apply to our daily lives. I know that you, like me, are busy people and we do not have much time for indulgence in theoretical speculation and creative application.

Yet one problem with idea that every single sermon ought to be readily applicable to life’s situations is that many biblical texts don’t seem to easily or readily apply to our modern daily lives. They seem to have other intentions. Take today’s Gospel lesson from Mark, for instance. . . .

Jesus takes a few of his disciples up on a mountain. Mountains, of course are used as those places where we are set apart, above the usual ruckus and clamor of life. So Jesus’ selection of this location might suggest that whatever he wants to tell or show these disciples cannot be told or shown to them down in the valley – they must arise out of the mundane and the commonplace that characterizes everyday life, and ascend to a higher level.

Of course, we also know from scripture that mountains are a favored location for a human encounter with the divine: Moses had to go up a mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus preaches his most famous sermon from a mountain – presumably so the crowds could see and hear him better. But also because, if one thinks of heaven as “up” as most people in Jesus’ day did - then a mountain puts one closer to heavenly, divine things.

So no sooner than had Jesus and his disciples arrived on the mountain than Jesus “transfigured” before them. His appearance becomes dazzling white and the disciples are blinded by his brightness. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah, two great heroes of the faith – the great leader and lawgiver, and the great prophet – are back from the dead, standing right there before them. It is at that moment that

the heavens are split open and the voice of God speaks directly to the disciples, saying, “This is my son! LISTEN to him!”

Frankly, it is kind of a relief to hear the voice of God again. In Mark’s gospel we have already heard the voice of God when Jesus was being baptized. But Jesus has been saying some strange things and performing some even stranger works since that first heavenly voice; thus he seems to be confusing his disciples. If he is indeed the Messiah, then he is not the one whom they were expecting; so how wonderful and exciting it is for this voice from heaven to address them directly – to declare specifically who Jesus is.

Perhaps you noticed that this scene at the mountaintop of Jesus’ transfiguration is placed squarely at the center of Mark’s Gospel. Maybe it is placed here to indicate that for Mark, at least, the transfiguration is a central part of the Christian faith. This account is about revelation, about the veil between heaven and earth being pulled back – if only for a moment; and that which is so often subtle, implicit and mysterious is being made wondrously explicit.

That idea fits rather nicely because Christianity is a “revealed religion.” That is to say that it is something **given to us**, rather than something **achieved** by us. We cannot come to this faith by simply taking long, solitary walks in the woods, or by starrng in contemplation at our navels, or by delving into our personal psyches. No, this faith comes to us a gift – through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

One of the great un-truths that is rampant in our modern world is the notion that religion is something that we come up with on our own – a kind of projection of our wishes and desires. Thus, people will sometimes say that while they are not religious themselves, they are fine if others are religious, if their religion is “helpful” to them. But that thought and expression implies that religion is simply “a crutch.” It suggests that religion is something that we create within us that we find helpful for assisting us in making it through another day.

That attitude has become part of the conventional way of thinking about religious faith. And I am sure that there may be something to be said for conceiving of religious faith as a part of our psychological make-up. But how on earth could WE have come up with a strange account like we have today we call the transfiguration? If WE were thinking up a religion that had as its purpose to help us live an easier, happier life – or simply a religion that whose design it was to help us get through the day, why in the world would we have thought up the Christian faith. Wouldn’t we have “projected” something that addressed more of OUR wishes and desires, instead of God’s call, commands and demands?

When we read an account like that of the transfiguration of Jesus, we get the sense that we are reading something from another realm. There seems to be this plain of existence other than the one on which we live our daily lives. This account we read today is so strange and so wonderful, that I seriously doubt that we could have made it up all by ourselves. This account is not something that arises from within us, rather it comes to us. We are the ones being addressed here. This account stretches us beyond our imaginations and causes us to pause and raise our heads in attention.

Sometimes we think of church as a place where we can talk to God. In and through prayer, we get to tell God what is on our minds and what we specifically want. But an account like the transfiguration suggests that the purpose of the church is for God to address us! What if church, and for that matter, religion itself is where we come to be addressed by God – to be told what is on God’s mind and what God needs and wants us to do?

In other words, what if church is much like that mountaintop experience of transfiguration? We come to church, withdrawing from the everyday world, not in order to escape the world, but rather to rise out of the daily distractions of the world and focus upon that Mystery who has focused upon us. We dare to come up the mountain. We risk saying to God, “Go ahead, Lord, speak!”

I’d be willing to bet that this is not the way the rest of the world gets most of its information. We are taught that the truth is something that we discover only through rational thought. We are schooled to discover the truth by following certain methods of investigation: We set up an hypothesis and then eliminate false explanations to come up with the one explanation that fits the subject under investigation, and that becomes the truth. That way of thinking about thinking works for most of the things we have to think about.

But what if we are trying to think about God? Sometimes we say that we are ‘down here’ and God is ‘up there’ – there in heaven. Another way of saying that is that we are fallible, finite, sinful creatures, and therefore have great difficulty thinking about the creator. There are just too many reasons - reasons having to do with who we are and who God is that keep us from being able to think our way ‘up to God.’

Just about anything we say to ourselves about God therefore is suspect. We have this natural tendency to conceive of God in ways that we find helpful and beneficial for ourselves. Of course, another word for that is **idolatry**. So how do we know that when we say something about God, we are not just offering a

projection of ourselves – a projection of how we hope or wish God would be? In other words, making God in OUR own image.....

Thank goodness, I don't think we normally do that. But one check on our thoughts about God is to submit those thoughts to scripture, just like we do here, every Sunday morning, as the scripture is read and studied and preached. When we do that, we are apt to hear, from time to time, a strange account like the one we listened to this morning.

Frankly we cannot explain this episode – and we especially can't explain it by our usual rational methods of investigation. We are not here to listen to an argument of some sort of rational proof for our doubts. Rather, we are being told an account that is beyond our rational understanding.

And I expect there are people right here today, that given enough time could tell us of inexplicable, less-than-rational mountaintop experiences of faith that they have had in their lives. Kathleen Norris, writing in *The Cloister Walk*, speaks of the joy of those visionary moments when we experience something that pushes us beyond our capacities for explanation; she calls them the “2 plus 2 equals 5” experiences

One of the great things about being a pastor is that sometimes people come to you and tell you strange, wonderful mysterious stories – often that they have told nobody else – I too have been told about such transfiguring moments. It could be something that seemed to them as if they were on a mountaintop and the veil between here and there had been lifted. It seemed as if the mundane reality as we normally experience it was pulled back so another, more wondrous reality could be exposed.

It could be an experience like ... well, like just last Thursday when Jen received a phone call from someone reportedly from Coconuts asking if we knew of anyone who might need a job as a short-order cook. The person on the phone identified himself as Jeff Colby, an assistant manager, and we could contact him or another employee, Taylor if we knew of someone interested in a job.

Three hours later a man came to the office door who had been homeless for only a week. He was looking for shelter for the cold night and a job, and was a credentialed chef and short-order cook. When Jen called Coconuts to tell them she was sending this man over to apply for the job, she asked specifically for assistant manager, Jeff Colby -

She was told that there was no one on staff by that name! Taylor, the kitchen manager, said he did need a cook, and to send the man down for an interview. But who was Jeff Colby? Jen had written the names down, so there was no

mistake.... We couldn't figure it out – the whole thing was just another one of those God-directed “ $2 + 2 = 5$ ” experiences.

I'm not sure that I can provide you with anything that you are to DO in your daily life as a result of this sermon concerning the transfiguration. But then note that all the disciples are to do is to “LISTEN to him.” That's what you have been doing to this point. You are here to LISTEN for a word from the Lord. Who knows, maybe even during this sermon the veil has been lifted between heaven and earth, and something has come to you that you would have been able to hear through any other means. Maybe God has used these moments of worship to speak to you by word and by Spirit. Maybe you have been the recipient of ... a revelation.

We should probably give thanks to God that we have not been left up to our own devices, in need of some way to “climb up” to God. Rather in certain wonderful, glorious, inexplicable, but nevertheless real moments, God comes to us. It is then that the veil is pulled back, if only for a moment; and it is as if God is speaking directly.

Let's give thanks that our God is relentlessly self-revealing. Let's give thanks for this faith so strange, so wonderful, so true that we could not have thought it up for ourselves. Let's give thanks that according to divine mathematics, “ $2 + 2$  can equal 5.”

Amen.