

## “IN BLAZE OF GLORY”

Mark 9:2-9 February 11, 2024

“**Not Your Average Joe’s**” is a chain of restaurants in the northeast that features, for example, Blue Hill Bay mussels, tuna Niçoise salad, miso salmon, New England clams and more. They are known for their made from scratch foods. Restaurant aside, the expression itself, however, is used to signify guys who are ordinary in every way. Average Joe, ordinary Joe, Joe Six-Pack, Joe Lunch bucket — all these monikers refer to people who do not stand out, who have no particular shining attribute and who do not attract attention. They may be decent human beings, and in fact, as average people, they probably are. Nice people. Good people. But average, not extraordinary. There’s a lot to be said for such people.

After all, average means what most of us are. There’s nothing wrong with having average success, average grades, an average golf swing, an average singing voice, or average looks. Usually, we excel in a couple areas of life, but where did we ever get this idea, we need to be above average in all things or somehow, we have failed as people, as parents or as a church? Average is, well, average.

And if we are really going to be honest, most of the time don’t we want Jesus to be the average Joe, or at least average Joe rabbi? We want someone we can relate to. Isn’t there a part of us that desires a Jesus who stubbed his toe, felt hungry, did a good days work, got tired, liked a

good meal, got angry, sometimes cried, and opposed the unjust systems? We want a Jesus, who was human, just like us, ordinary, average folks. That's a Jesus who makes sense to us, one who loves, teaches, and points us to God. It is Jesus's humanness, average Joe-ness (and by the way Jesus was a common average name in his day) that connects us to him.

Yet, there are other times when we need Jesus to be something more than average. When a crisis hits, Jesus help. When we have lost direction and wonder what our purpose is and what to do next, Jesus help! When our sins have piled up and we are drowning in guilt and consequences, Jesus help! When facing a tough situation, and unsure future, or a conflict resolution, Jesus help! When struggling to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply, and everything in our being wants to strike out in retribution, Jesus help! When we hear the deep cries and suffering in the world and have no where else to turn, Jesus come! Yes, there are times we want and need Jesus to be more than just another average Joe.

Well, there is good news. Jesus is indeed something more than average, probably much more than we can or care to comprehend. This is what the disciples found out one day.

Notice our passage begins with the words, “**Six days later...**” which should cause us to pause and ask, “**What happened 6 days before?**” Well, 6 days before Jesus and his closest disciples traveled to

Caesarea Phillipi, a northern area outside of Jewish territory. While there, Jesus asked his disciples, “**Who do people say I am?**” They told him, “**Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets.**” For your average rabbi, these would all be high praise and compliments. Then comes the critical question, “**But who do you say that I am?**” Peter answered, “**You are the Messiah.**” (One of Peter’s few shining moments).

This is the climatic point of Mark’s gospel. For 8 chapters Jesus has been with the disciples and he wonders if they have any clue that he is more than your average Joe rabbi. And the good news is these disciples have caught a glimpse of the truth. This is the revelation Jesus was hoping for. It was a high moment of his ministry. And then Jesus drops the hammer, or what surely felt like getting hit by one. He is indeed the Messiah, and now he is going to Jerusalem to suffer, be rejected, die, and rise again.

I can only imagine the effect of that message was like going to a **50-year wedding anniversary party**, with all the family and friends gathered about in celebration, when suddenly your spouse of 50 years drops over dead. That would certainly put a damper on the party, right? That’s what the disciples must have felt like.

They got that Jesus was more than average. He was the Messiah, but they did not understand what kind of Messiah Jesus was. They still did not see him as the Son of God, which is the great mystery of the

Gospel of Mark. Peter reacts to this cross and death news by manhandling Jesus aside and rebuking him to his face. At which point Jesus sternly says, **“Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”**

After this, Jesus begins to teach the disciples the real cost of discipleship, **deny yourselves, pick up the cross, and follow me.** This is not the message they wanted to hear. They wanted a divine conquering hero who would solve all the world’s problems, not an invitation to suffer and lay down their lives in the service of Christ. I suspect that we are no different. The cost of discipleship is high. Can’t we just have the average cost, the one that doesn’t include a cross? But Jesus doesn’t give that option. The disciples are shocked, upset, and disheartened. Have we hitched ourselves to the wrong wagon? And 6 days later...this morning’s story comes to play.

**“Six days later, 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 bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.”**

## **I. WORD OF ASSURANCE**

SNL comedian Al Franken did a funny bit called **Daily Affirmations with Stuart Smalley**, an unlicensed therapist in many 12 step programs. Stuart would begin the show by looking in the mirror and

telling himself. **“I am going to do a terrific show today, I’m going to help people, and dog gone it, people like me.”** Favorite clip was when Michael Jordan was host on SNL. Stuart tells Michael to look in the mirror and say to himself. **“Hello Michael, I don’t have to be a great basketball player. I don’t have to dribble the ball fast or put it in the basket. All I have to do is be the best Michael I can be. Because I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and dog gone it, people like me.”** Watching Michael try hard not to crack up was the best part.

While Stuart Smalley is a therapist spoof, there are times in life when we all need words of affirmation and assurance. The transfiguration was such a time for the disciples. In the face of their doubt and confusion about Jesus, and with Jerusalem and the Cross looming menacing before them, this glimpse of glory gave them something to hold on to. Through the transfiguration, God affirms Jesus is no average Joe or expected Messiah. He is the Son of God. Even if they did not understand what was going to take place, it was in the will of God, Jesus is right, and they would bear witness to glory.

We need to know these things too. If we are going to deny ourselves, pick up the cross, and follow Jesus we need to know Jesus is who he said he was, that glory awaits us, and the Son of God has the power to see us through. In Jesus, we glimpse the heavens and have a faith that holds on to us. In that assurance we can dare to walk this life in faith.

## II. THE TRANSFORMATION BUSINESS

**Ron Rolheiser, wrote, "The agony in the garden -- the place of transformation"**. Jesus took away our sins in the same way as a filter purifies water. A filter takes in impure water, holds the impurities inside of itself, and gives back only the pure water. It transforms rather than transmits. We see this in Jesus: Like the ultimate cleansing-filter he purifies life itself:

- He takes in hatred, holds it, transforms it and gives back love;
- He takes in bitterness, holds it, transforms it and gives back graciousness;
- He takes in curses, holds them, transforms them and gives back blessing;
- He takes in chaos, holds it, transforms it and gives back order;
- He takes in fear, holds it, transforms it and gives back freedom;
- He takes in jealousy, holds it, transforms it and gives back affirmation;
- And he takes in Satan and murder, holds them, transforms them and gives back only God and forgiveness and new life.

The transfiguration bears witness that Jesus has the divine power to transform lives and communities. Lest we forget, Jesus Christ is in the transformation business, and if we are going to be his followers, then so are we.

What's strange about it is the divine power is not like the powers of this world that seek to dominate and diminish our dignity and

subjugate our personhood. The transforming power of God fulfills us. It enables us to become what God made us to be in the first place; instruments and children of God's kingdom. When we are caught up in God's divine work, then nothing we do is average. So, how do we tap into this divine transfiguring power?

### **III. HOW DO WE TAP IN TO THIS DIVINE TRANSFORMATION POWER?**

We begin by asking what is Jesus doing up on that mountain? He is consulting with Moses and Elijah about the events to come. As great as Moses and Elijah were, Jesus is the Son of God. Why is he consulting with them? The consistent habit of Jesus's life is that he consulted with God before making major decisions. Jesus put his plans and intentions before God. Wouldn't that solve many a problem or at least prevent many a problem if we practiced this in the first place?

To pick up the cross, to deny self, and to follow Jesus doesn't usually involve literal death. What it involves is the laying down of our lives, the TV remote, our sins, health, problems, dreams, futures, education, occupation, plans, relationships, decisions, time, finances, children, homes, etc. at feet of Jesus. It is putting our whole selves at God's disposal. It is entrusting God with every aspect of our lives. God doesn't force us to do this. It is a deliberate decision to surrender our control and trust in the one who has the power to transform us.

**W.H. Auden, "Epilogue" to *The Age of Anxiety*, in *Collected Poems***

We would rather be ruined than changed,  
 We would rather die in dread  
 Than climb the cross of the moment  
 And let our illusions die.

The odd thing about this transfiguration power is it usually works through weakness, suffering, and surrender. As long as we are depending on our own strength, intelligence, and resources, we make little progress in spiritual life. It is the surrendered life that taps into the transforming power of God. That is the dying to self and living for and with Christ.

#### **IV. TRICK TO CHINESE COOKING**

Recently, I discovered a trick to Chinese cooking, or at least how to tenderize your beef before stir frying. The magic ingredient is baking soda. Adding baking soda to your cut up meat tenderizes it. It makes a cheap steak taste like a quality one. However, the process is not instant. After applying the baking soda, you need to cover the meat and place it in the fridge for a couple hours. It needs to work its way into the meat.

Notice what God tells the disciples, “**This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.**” Needless to say, the transfiguration was an extraordinary experience, one not easily described or explained, **and perhaps we shouldn’t**. Like our own glimpses of heaven and faith encounters we first experience them, and then begin to comprehend them later. Peter



wants to talk about it right then, and in essence is told to be quiet by both God and Jesus as they come down the mountain.

The second way we tap into the transfiguration power of Christ is to listen to Jesus. Quite trying to figure all the words out. Listen, be still and meditate on the words of Jesus. Let them work their way into your heart, mind, and life. Stop talking and allow the words and life of Jesus to sink in so their transforming power can be unleashed in you. I know this is hard for many of us action oriented, always need to be babbling people. But transformation takes time, daily walking with Jesus, daily reading his words, and focus. You don't have to figure them all out before you obey them. Listen, so that hear the voice of Jesus becomes the average.

One of the definitions of average is to be in the middle of. That's what the transfiguration story does for all of us average Joes and Josephines. It places us in the middle of God's grace, will, and power. It affirms our faith, and it rewrites the story of our lives so that even the average becomes extraordinary. Amen.

# First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

## Sunday, February 11, 2024

### Second Scripture Lesson

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#### Mark 9:2-9

<sup>2</sup>Six days later, 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,

<sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

<sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

<sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

<sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

<sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

<sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**