

A Vision of the Kingdom
Sermon February 19, 2012

Mark 9:2-9

Last summer, to celebrate my 50th birthday – that’s right, I’m 50 – Jeff and I went to Greenville, Maine for a few days. Greenville is nestled in the mountains of western Maine and sits at the southern shore of beautiful Moosehead Lake. While we were there, we decided to go hiking. The motel where we were staying kindly provided us with maps and descriptions of local hiking trails. After browsing through the descriptions, we decided to go hiking on Borestone Mountain, a 2,000-foot summit that promised sweeping, panoramic views. I was interested in the hike because half-way up the mountain, there is a check station run by the National Audubon Society. In the station, there are all kinds of exhibits about local geology, wildlife, and history. The hike was a 4-mile round trip, which didn’t sound too bad.

The first part of the hike was very nice – gently rolling terrain, beautiful dense woods, an occasional pond with ducks and other animals nearby. Then we reached the check station, and it was really nice. It was a rustic log building sitting on the shore of a gorgeous pond. When we sat down to rest outside the building, I happened to look across the pond, and I noticed that the peak of the mountain was up there pretty far. But the peak was also bare – no trees, just bare rock – which meant the views would be awesome.

So after eating some lunch, we started hiking the second half of the trail. Now, when we read the trail description, I guess I had failed to notice the part where it noted that the trail was actually rated as “Challenging.” I also missed the part that said, and I quote, “The last 600 feet of elevation includes sheer rock faces that can be difficult to climb.”

Well, they weren’t kidding. There were parts of that trail that were so steep that you had to

literally climb with your hands and legs. At one point, the sheer rock face had iron bars embedded in it just so you could pull yourself up. At another point, the only thing that stood between me and a sheer, 100-foot drop was a slab of rock that was maybe 15 inches wide. The whole climb was one of the most strenuous and exhausting things I’ve ever done. And I felt pretty good about it – here I was – 50 years old, and I could climb up a mountain like this. Yes, I was feeling very good, until a young couple – with a baby in a backpack! – went flying past us like we were standing still.

Well, anyway, we made it to the top, and, WOW! The views were incredible. You could see for miles in every direction. Miles and miles of mountains, and lakes, and not one sign of civilization anywhere. We stayed up there for quite a while – until I started to get a little chilly from being on the exposed peak. Then, as I gathered my backpack, I was struck with a moment of panic. “Oh, my goodness,” I thought. “I have to climb back down that mountain.” I actually wondered for a second if there was room on the peak to land a helicopter.

As hard as it was to get up the mountain, getting back down would be even harder. All the pounding and jarring from stepping down is really hard on my knees. But, there was no other way down. So with plenty of stops to rest, and by leaning heavily on my sturdy hiking stick, I made it down.

My knees ached and my legs were wobbly for hours afterward, but the views at the top of Borestone Mountain made it all worth it.

This morning’s gospel reading is a story of another mountaintop experience. It’s the story we call “The Transfiguration.” Jesus takes three of his disciples up a high mountain, where these disciples are treated to an incredible view.

Not a view of the landscape around the mountain, but a view – a glimpse – of who Jesus really was and what he was really about.

The text says that once on the top of the mountain, Jesus was “transfigured” before the disciples. This is a word we don’t use much. It’s different from the word “transformation.” “Transfigured” means that Jesus’ outward appearance was changed, but that Jesus himself was not changed.

But for the disciples, it was a moment of transformation because in this moment, God’s work in Jesus Christ was revealed very clearly. Not only was Jesus’ appearance changed, but the disciples also had a vision of Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus. And that’s significant. Because it demonstrated to the disciples that in Jesus, God was at work to help people understand how the laws of Moses – the 10 commandments – and the words of prophets like Elijah fit together as part of God’s plan for humanity.

Following the laws were not enough. Obedience of God’s laws must always be tempered by God’s values of justice, inclusion, and well-being for all people. This is the glory of God that was revealed in Jesus, and this is the glory that those disciples glimpsed at the top of that mountain.

This was a true mountaintop experience for the disciples (and for Jesus, too), and our natural inclination is to want to seek out our own mountaintop experiences – to follow Jesus up the mountain where we, too, can get a glimpse of God’s glory in Jesus.

But ultimately, this isn’t a story about our going up. Rather, it’s a story about Jesus and the disciples coming down. That journey back down the mountain must have been difficult. For the disciples, it was difficult to leave behind what they had experienced. There were no

cameras that they could use to record the experience. There was no Facebook or Twitter that they could use to instantly share the experience with their friends. All they had as they traveled back down the mountain was their own recollection of the experience.

For Jesus, the trip down the mountain was hard because he knew what lay ahead for him. Jesus knew that he was about to journey all the way down into brokenness, fear, disappointment, and loss.

Down into the mundane nature of everyday life. Down into the nitty-gritty details of misunderstanding, squabbling, disbelieving disciples. Down into the religious and political quarrels of the day. Down into the jealousies, misunderstandings, and hostilities that affect our relationships. Down into the poverty and pain that are part and parcel of our life in this world. Jesus came down.

And so did his disciples. They came down, too, into all that messiness of human life. They walked beside Jesus, watching him struggle with people who refused to listen. They watched Jesus argue with religious leaders who stubbornly clung to their own interpretations of God’s laws and who often ignored the words of the prophets. They watched Jesus become angry with people who thought that making money was more important than obeying God or loving others.

But those three disciples who had gone up the mountain with Jesus had one advantage: they had seen a glimpse of God’s glory. In Jesus’ changed and dazzling appearance, they saw a brightness that exceeded anything that seemed possible on earth: Jesus’ clothes were whiter than any bleach could ever make them. On that mountaintop, they saw, for a moment, what *could be*.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Lent, and as we read and talk about the gospel lessons over the next six weeks, we, too, will walk with Jesus on his way to the cross. We, too, will experience the pain, the frustration, the brokenness that surrounded him. And we know it well, don't we? Because we're also surrounded by pain, frustration, and brokenness.

In our reading this morning from 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul describes how the good news of God's work is "veiled" from those people who are blinded by the gods of this world – people who can only see the brokenness the world as it *is*, and not the world as it *can be* when people live and love as Jesus lived and loved.

As people of faith, and as followers of Jesus, we can look around us at the messiness and still manage to see envision things the way they *could be* – the way God wants them to be. This is what it means to see with the eyes of faith.

Like Peter, James and John, we **can** have glimpses of God's glory, but they may be so fleeting that we might be tempted to dismiss them. But we must not only watch for these glimpses – and expect to see them – but we must also learn to recognize them as signs of God at work in our lives and in our world.

And were might we see glimpses of God's glory? In simple, everyday acts of love and caring. In the quiet, unassuming kind of love that acts in spite of and in the midst of the messy stuff of life.

I've seen glimpses of God's glory in the faces of the people who work at the County Public

Health department who came to pick up all the baby items we collected a couple of weeks ago. These workers are so overwhelmed with the incredible need of people in our county, but they knew that through our generosity, some babies would have things they need, and some families would have a little more hope.

I've seen a glimpse of God's glory in the form of meals and cards and visits to people who are homebound.

I've glimpsed God's glory when someone offers to walk along in faith with another person who is desperately searching for meaning in their life.

I've seen a glimpse of God's glory in the willingness of this congregation to step out and be God's love to our neighbors in so many ways.

I've seen glimpses of God's glory every time we obey God's commandment to love one another, and when we do so in ways that are just, liberating, hospitable, and healing.

Were the disciples were changed by their experience on the mountaintop? As they climbed down that mountain with Jesus, and as the glow of what they had seen and experienced fades, and as the brutal reality of life takes it place, would Peter, James, and John be able to remember their glimpse of God's glory? Would they then go on to live as people who are grounded in the hope? Would they have faith in what *can be* through God's love?

The bigger question is: Will we? Amen.