

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Transformation

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

February 14th, 2021

“Broken Cadences: A Reflection on John Philip Newell’s

Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation

Last week we looked at the chapter *Empty Notes* to center our reflection. We looked at the story of Jesus’ healings and spreading the good news throughout Galilee. This week is Transfiguration Sunday where we look at the Transfiguration story of Jesus in Mark 9 as we reflect on the theme of transformation. What relevance does Transfiguration Sunday hold in our Christian calendar year and why do we continue to celebrate it?

Transfiguration illustrates to us the power of Christ, thus the power of the Gospel, by Jesus embracing his truest self. Through Jesus’ transfiguration, we are invited to open ourselves up to our own personal transformations through the power of Christ. This is a general theme throughout Lent as we look to the pinnacle moment of Christ’s suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. Let us begin our reflection today by reflecting on the importance of mountains similar to the mountain in which Jesus and disciples climb in our gospel story of Mark.

Mountains have always shaped and guided me throughout my life. In some ways, I feel lost without them, as if I am standing on unstable ground. In Tennessee where I grew up in the Holston Valley, I was surrounded by both the Unicoi and Iron Mountain chains of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I followed the Blue Ridge mountains up to their foothills to my alma mater of Emory & Henry College where we were always just a few miles away from some trail connected to these mountains. In Denver, wherever I was in the city, I could always see the Front Range looming off in their beauty and majesty in the western half of the state. Even here in Dawson county, the Big Sheep mountains aren’t far off here on the High Plains of the West. The Haitian proverb I shared in the newsletter this week that says, “Beyond mountains, there are mountains” certainly captures the grandeur and mystery of mountains as you get to a mountain peak and see nothing but

wilderness. In my life, mountains are places that have always been a space to heal broken relationships.

Some of the only positive memories I have with my father are hiking. Now hiking on the Florida peninsula is certainly not mountainous, but when my family and I were outdoors together, we were able to escape our brokenness and our pain. In my reflection on mountains, I am reminded of a trip my father, my sisters, and I took to Cumberland Gap National Historical Park when I was in college. It was a funny choice for my father to choose as a place to meet because he couldn't stand driving in the mountains due to growing up in Florida where they have warning signs of limited visibility due to hills on the horizon. Regardless of his disdain for mountains, something different connected us all that day as we were reminded of the love we shared, even if that was only through our last name.

Mountains are an illustration of life and the whirlwind of a journey life takes us on throughout our lives. They are revered in ancient and modern cultures alike, even considered sacred spaces. Mountains in the Bible are where transformations take place. Think of Mount Gerizim where Abraham takes Isaac, Mount Sinai where Moses receives the ten commandments, or Moses' death as he overlooks the Promised Land from the heights of Mount Pisgah. Let us reflect on Mount Hermon, where Jesus is joined by Elijah and Moses.

I would venture to say at this point in Jesus' ministry he is absolutely drained. At this point in the story, Jesus has experienced the loss of his friend, John the Baptist, he has fed 5,000 people in one story (Mark 6:30-44) and 4,000 people in another (Mark 8:1-10), and Jesus has healed, exorcised demons, and walked on water, which means he must feel defeated and exhausted at this point. Just before our Transfiguration story of today, Jesus reflects on his own death, which certainly means he knows he has stirred up some trouble in the Roman provinces before he begins his journey to his final destination of Jerusalem. Jesus, most likely needing some time away to rejuvenate, takes Peter, James, and John, his closest disciples, up to Mount Hermon.

Mark 2:2-6 ² 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, ³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ 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.” ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

They were terrified stands out to me, and I can imagine I would be as well. Revelations in the Bible are always a combination of terrified and glorious. Think of the shepherds tending their flocks and the angels calming them down before they proclaimed the message of the birth of Christ, or Mary woken up in the middle of the night only to be confronted by the angel Gabriel at the foot of her bed. Peter is so scared he says we should make a shrine to remember this moment. How Old Testament of you, Peter!

Mark 2:7-9 ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

The Coming of Elijah

⁹ 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.

If the disciples weren’t terrified enough, then a voice from the heavens gives them an order as a cloud comes over them. Now when you’re hiking in the Rockies and a cloud comes overtop of you, you may be about to be struck by lightning, so imagine their fear in this moment. The ancient Celts believed the mist or fog was both mysterious or intriguing and simultaneously something they should fear due to it hindering their sight. The mist or fog symbolized a change coming forth, and I believe the cloud holds a similar meaning here in this story. I must attribute this last piece of commentary to Pastor Brenda because each week she translates the Kione Greek into English. She pointed out this week that verse 7, where God speaks to the disciples, God gives a direct order, not a suggestion. “LISTEN TO HIM!” referring to Jesus, his beloved son.

I certainly believe we are in need both as individuals and as a collective Body of Christ for a transfiguration moment. We are deeply disconnected with one another because of politics, cultural divides, class, and whether we live in rural areas or cities. We are so polarized that some folks on both sides of the aisle refuse to speak to someone because of their beliefs. We need to look no further than our own backyards to see this division, but we are seeing division in our world right now like in India as farmers strike against corporate power over the farms and livestock they have raised and tended to. We are seeing this in the ongoing Palestine and

Israel conflict over disputed borders. We are seeing this in our own country as retail workers of Alabama strike against Amazon's power over their lives. I often become quite cynical when I read these articles describing these types of events, but I am reminded of the words of the late Michael Brooks, "Be ruthless with systems, be kind to people." This mantra, if you will, reminds me of the transfiguration story and that transformation is often just painful as it is revelatory.

John Philip Newell offers us guidance in time such as this because he believes both healing and salvation are inseparable from one another.¹ He says,

"There are certain brokennesses in our lives and relations and world that will not be healed until we are all healed. We are so deeply part of one another, and of all things, that it is meaningless to speak about wholeness in separation. Wholeness comes in relationship, not in fragmentation. Until we move together again in harmony with the hymn of the universe, our songs of salvation will sound like broken cadences torn from the whole" (Newell p 109-110).

It will take not just a healing of human relationships, but the healing of our Earth and the healing of all life that calls this Earth home. John Philip Newell tells the story of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who was a Jesuit priest and a former soldier from World War I. As many during this time, he found God after he killed others in the war in the name of France and found himself questioning the world around him without a God of love, compassion, and grace. He was deeply influenced by his time as a Jesuit in China as he studied Chinese philosophy and other religious and philosophical traditions of East Asia. Chardin says, "I believe that the Church is still a child. Christ, by whom she lives, is immeasurably greater than she imagines" (Chardin *Heart of Matter* p 117-118). We, as United Methodists, can certainly see this in our own church as the Pharisees reference the Book of Discipline and the Sadducees speak down to us with their "My way or the highway" approach from their Ivory towers.

Newell reminds us about Jesus' ministry being summed up in one simple concept, relationships. Chardin was influenced by this concept in his experience of through East Asia and Newell was influenced this through his experience of reading Scottish literature. They both realize something the

¹ See p. 109 of his chapter *Broken Cadences*. He speaks about salvation and healing in more detail leading to the quote following this reference.

Transfiguration story tells us today, "Listen to my Son!" we are all connected.

I believe it is time that we as Christians help others see our connectedness through our connection to all Creation through Christ. John Philip Newell sums this up nearly perfectly by saying, "It is that part of us, and of all things, that stirs a passion for union. It is that part of us that longs to move in relationships and to find new beginnings by coming closer to the core of one another" (Newell p 114).

We will return to this theme of creation after Lent is over as we continue our journey of healing and salvation together. Earth day and Arbor day will be wonderful opportunities for us to get our hands dirty in the earth of God and I am looking to imagine of how we can be leaders in our communities by developing/strengthening community gardens, organizing projects of conservation throughout this beautiful land we call home, and maybe even volunteering some time at Makoshika to put into practice the healing of Creation. Yet today, I leave you with this quote to ponder. Newell says in the final words of this chapter, "If we can find ways of holding together again our love of Christ with our love of the earth's dirt, not just religious dirt or Christian dirt, but all dirt, including the most basic elements of the universe, we will find ourselves part of a new birthing. Then we will find ourselves hearing again the deepest harmonies of the universe within us and within all things. Heart of Jesus, Heart of Creation, unite us to yourself" (Newell p 122). This is our prayer, Amen.