

*Shiny*

Mark 9:2-9

February 19, 2012

Whitefish UMC

- ✦ People spend a lot of time and money and effort trying to come into the presence of God. We travel near and far to encounter the living Christ. Each year, thousands of pilgrims flock to the Holy Land to walk the steps of Jesus. But it isn't so easy any more—with all the volatility in the Middle East these days, you need to carefully consider whether to go and what to see and who to talk to if you do choose to risk it.
- ✦ And even if you don't go to the Holy Land, you can go to other traditional holy sites—Lourdes, Guadalupe, Croagh Patrick, Whidbey Island (in England), Rome, Assisi—to name just a few.
- ✦ These are places where people have come into God's presence in the past—places where others have experienced God, and people understandably want to experience God's presence there, too.
- ✦ If we could only locate God in a particular place, we'd go there, wouldn't we? Even though we'd be a little scared, who wouldn't want to see God face-to-face? We are fascinated by accounts of people seeing God—and a little dubious, too, if the truth be told.
- ✦ The Bible is full of such encounters: Moses and the burning bush, Jacob and the ladder full of angels, Job and the voice out of the whirlwind. They are all cracked doors between this world and some other, brighter, place where God is not on vacation but a very real presence.

- ✦ But it doesn't seem as if things work this way anymore. So people try all kinds of things in hopes of finding God. They fast, they pray, they go on pilgrimage, they beat drums. Some follow ancient spiritual traditions and others make things up as they go along. Some go to seminary and others go to India.
- ✦ Last Sunday Lynn Dykstra told me about a movie that she thought I would like—it's called "Lourdes"—about just one of those sorts of places. Of course I took her advice, and I'm glad I did. Here's what the New York Times says about the film:
- ✦ Moving between heaven and hell, or perhaps just sky and earth, the pilgrims who walk and tremble and are sometimes pushed through ["Lourdes"](#) in wheelchairs are usually seen at a remove. One exception is Christine, a young woman with multiple sclerosis who is played by the French actress [Sylvie Testud](#). Tucked into a wheelchair, her limbs immobile and hands tightly curled, Christine looks around her — at the other visitors, the helpful aides, the strange locale — with a gaze that seems at once incurious and beatific.
- ✦ Situated in southwest France north of the Pyrenees, Lourdes is thought by Roman Catholics to have been where the impoverished 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous saw the Virgin Mary in 1858. She was canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1933 and by Hollywood a decade later when her story was turned into the 1943 kitsch classic ["The Song of Bernadette,"](#) with Jennifer Jones. Millions now visit Lourdes annually to attend services and drink from and bathe in the grotto waters, thought to have healing powers. It's been claimed that the water can cure, though, as the Lourdes Web site, [lourdes-france.org](#), puts it:

“For a modern mentality, it is difficult to say that something is ‘inexplicable.’ They can only say that it is ‘unexplained.’ ”

- ✦ What all religious pilgrimages, including the one in the quietly intriguing “Lourdes” have in common is a desire to know the living God and to experience God’s presence. For we all yearn for a glimpse of glory. We want a clear picture of God and tangible evidence of God’s presence in our lives. If only we could be like the disciples Peter, James, and John, and see Christ standing before us in dazzling white clothing.
- ✦ Today is transfiguration Sunday, and the transfiguration is the story of God appearing in a tangible, vivid, and real way. Jesus takes his three closest disciples on a mountain hike. When the four reach the top of the mountain, Peter, James, and John see this glorious event. They witness the dazzling face of Jesus, with his clothes shining whiter “than anything could bleach them.” They behold Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.
- ✦ They view the three biblical giants standing in front of their very eyes, with a blazing, bright light illuminating their bodies. And it is a sight to behold.
- ✦ The disciples have been given a priceless privilege. James and John stand in awe, allowing the experience to penetrate their hearts. But practical Peter prepares a wild plan. He starts thinking out loud about how the moment can be captured. He desires time to stand still—so he can live in this moment of shining glory.

- ✦ “Let me build some dwellings,” or booths, in the other gospels, Peter says. Good old Peter—he wants to busy himself with normal ways of capturing the high points—just like we do.
- ✦ I have a friend who I love dearly but who drives me nuts photographing every experience—to the extent that I want to scream—“just enjoy it!” Maybe you know someone like that, or maybe you are that person.
- ✦ And we can understand. We want good times to last forever. We are like little kids, running barefoot in the summer night where I grew up, trying to capture fireflies in a Mason jar so their beauty and light will last longer.
- ✦ We want a tangible God we can take out and hold when the going gets tough. Yet God’s tangible presence seems as elusive as a firefly escaping from a jar. Despite our desperate cries and helpless prayers, the tangible touch of God doesn’t last long—if we can know it at all.
- ✦ Some of us may never have experienced a mountaintop experience like the one in today’s scripture—one where we know we see Jesus shining on us. And let me let you in on a little secret—a lot of preachers don’t like to preach on Transfiguration Sunday, in part because they have not experienced such a dramatic time. Or if they have, they have trouble talking about it.
- ✦ But even when the disciples do experience God in such a glorious way, they have to come down off the mountain. The dazzling experience lasts only a few moments, and then after God speaks, the cloud disappears, and the disciples walk down the mountain with a plain-clothed ordinary Jesus.

- ✦ And even though they have seen his real identity as God's chosen One, they fail to act any differently. Yes, though their eyes have beheld the glory of the Lord, they fail to take hold of this glory—and they revert to their old ways—squabbling amongst themselves, failing to pay attention to Jesus' voice.
- ✦ *The disciples fail to let this glory transform them.*
- ✦ Think back for a moment on Moses—who also went up to the mountain, knew God in the burning bush, and walked down again. And there is a significant difference in how Moses responded and how James, Peter, and John did. The disciples, Jesus' friends, come down the mountain, telling no one what they have seen, and forget about the powers Jesus has given to them to heal and cast out demons, among other gifts.
- ✦ Not Moses, though. He follows God's instructions, and reflects the presence of God to all he encounters. Peter, James, and John fade. Moses shines.
- ✦ Have you ever seen someone's face shine? My favorite part of a wedding occurs after the vows have been exchanged, when the pastor has the bride and groom turn around and face the congregation, introducing them as a married couple. The two single adults are now husband and wife. Their faces shine. They have been transformed—changed.
- ✦ The same is true for a graduation—at just the moment when the graduate receives his or her diploma, shakes hands with the president or the principal, and turns to face the audience. They have been transformed—changed. Their faces shine.

- ✦ Last night, when talking with the young actors from the Borrowers after their marvelous performance, their faces shone like the sun. When you know you have done well—individually and together—you can't help but shine. And the confidence gained by these youth will transform them forever.
- ✦ In each event, the significance of the moment is reflected on the face of the person. Their excitement cannot be contained—their faces shine.
- ✦ Change, transformation can happen all at once, or it can be so constant that you don't even feel the difference til there is one. It can be so slow that you don't know your life is better or worse until it is. Or, it can just blow you away—making you something different in an instant.
- ✦ An encounter with Jesus Christ has the power to blow you away, making you something different in an instant. I have a friend who is a hospice chaplain, who reports several instances of sitting with a dying person and being asked to move over a little so the patient can see Jesus better.
- ✦ And maybe you have experienced a time when you were at a loss for words in a difficult or tragic situation, and the Spirit suddenly interceded for you. Possibly God has entered a dark, lonely night of yours, filling your room with a mysterious light. Perhaps during a particularly fearful time, a gentle peace touched you as you knew you were not alone.
- ✦ God's presence and power are with us. We see God through nature, friends, and family members. We hear God's voice in the laughter of a little child and in prayers that are answered.

- ✦ We feel God’s touch in the fingertips of a friend who wipes away a tear from our eye or holds our hand. We can see, feel, hear, touch God. God is with us. God is Emmanuel.
- ✦ A time that I see and touch and hear God is during baptism. For when we are baptized we die to our old selves and are transfigured into something new. Paul writes in Second Corinthians “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away—see, everything has become new.” (5:17)
- ✦ For me, as your pastor, these are mountaintop moments. I think of you—young and not so young alike—shining with the newness of your life in Christ—and have you noticed—your faces DO SHINE during baptism!!
- ✦ The same is true during confirmation—and during Holy Communion—I see, touch, hear, and know Christ in YOU!!—especially at those times. Last week I saw Christ-light shine in a wife’s face as she lovingly helped her husband through a difficult moment.
- ✦ And so what is our response after these mountaintop moments? There’s a good saying among mountaineers: “With enough help and equipment, any bloody idiot can get *up* the mountain; the trick is to get back down alive.”
- ✦ We can walk down the mountain and revert to our ordinary ways and continue as self-absorbed oblivious individuals. Or, we can be so alive in Christ that WE can shine.
- ✦ We can let others see the new creation-clothing God has placed on our bodies, allowing God’s love to literally shine through our faces to all we meet. We can become transmitters of the light.

- ✦ At the end of the film, “Lourdes,” some of the pilgrims go on an outing to the top of a mountain—the view is spectacular—and there, Christine receives her first kiss, and indeed she is transfigured by love and by God’s presence in it. Christine’s previously impassive face is subtly lifted, full of light.
- ✦ Now we can travel to the Holy Land or to other holy places. We can buy dozens of books on spirituality. But no matter what we do, all our efforts are wasted if we don’t let God lift the veil that we put up to conceal our true selves—if we won’t let God into the muck of our lives to transform us into glory. Unless our search for God produces a new transparent person, there is no reason to continue searching.
- ✦ Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany—the season of light. It ends in a burst of blazing glory.
- ✦ Later this week, we will gather once again in this place, allowing our foreheads or hands to be imprinted with ashes formed in the sign of the cross. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten journey—the journey down the mountain with Jesus, and with him toward the cross.
- ✦ During this season, traditionally a season of darker, muted hues, we will have an opportunity to return again and again to the cross. Through our Lenten disciplines, we will be able to sit and dwell in the face-to-face presence of Christ.
- ✦ Lent is a time of searching for Christ. Lent is a time of drawing closer to Christ, and learning more about his true identity.
- ✦ As we go searching for Christ during this sacred season, let us draw others to the search with us, enabling them to see Christ through all that we do.

- ✦ And may our encounters with Christ shine through our faces, so that he becomes the light in the darkness, through us.
- ✦ May we, too, be transfigured—transformed—changed—and so alive in Christ that we are shiny with His light.
- ✦ Today and always...Amen.