**Becoming Real**

**Text: Mark 9:2-9**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Many decades ago, a biblical scholar by the name of J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. His thesis was that we try to reduce God into something small enough that we can comprehend the Holy One with our limited minds. When you do that, you end up with one who is hardly holy. No concept of God that can be fully grasped by this small, finite, culturally contingent and historically limited piece of gray matter is even remotely close to the wonder, the glory, the mystery of the Holy One.

This story of the Transfiguration reminds us of the awesome mystery of God. And it reminds us as well that Jesus Christ, the one who reveals to the Church what we *do* know of God, is likewise – ultimately – shrouded in a cloud of unknowing.

There are any number of theories that try to explain the Transfiguration. Some argue that it is a post-Easter encounter with the Risen Christ that has been written back into Mark’s story. Others argue that the eternal, divine nature of Jesus has broken into space-time, revealing Jesus’ true identity to his disciples. Still others would say that it is a literal, historical event which we just have to accept by faith. Those who explain it this way have gone so far as to try to identify the exact mountain upon which the Transfiguration occurred.

But what we’re dealing with here is theology, not geography. What we have here is an amazing story that points toward the mystery of God and transcends anything that we can understand with our feeble minds. All attempts to reduce this story to something that can be grasped in rational, logical terms are all variants on the “small God” approach to Christianity that Phillips and others have so justifiably criticized over the centuries. God is too vast, too awesome, too mysterious, too amazing, too wonderful to be reduced to the level of our understanding.

But that doesn’t stop us from trying; not only here in the 9th chapter of Mark but with many other Bible stories as well. Some folks talk about the Red Sea in the Exodus story as really being the Sea of Reeds, a swampy area that the Israelites could’ve crossed on foot; thus reducing the story of the parting of the Red Sea into manageable, explainable, scientific terms. The cloud that shrouds Moses on Mt. Sinai is explained away by the notion that Mt. Sinai is really a volcano. The feeding of the 5,000 becomes a nice little moralist tale about sharing. There are any number of ways to explain away portions of these stories as being unscientific and therefore unacceptable.

On the other hand, there are those who would explain the Transfiguration by going to the other extreme and putting their brains on hold altogether. And not just the Transfiguration, but these other biblical stories as well. This approach to scripture says that *all* of these stories are *literally true*. They happened *exactly* the way that the Bible says they happened. In this attempt to de-mystify biblical faith, the universe was created in 6 literal 24 hour days, God really did part the Red Sea and allow the Israelites to pass through, Moses came down from the cloud atop Mt. Sinai with 2 stone tablets that God Himself had inscribed with the 10 Commandments, and 5,000 people were fed from 5 loaves and 2 fish that Jesus miraculously multiplied. This is the approach to faith the leads some folks to say, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!”

This approach brings to mind the story of the Sunday School teacher who asked her class what faith is. One eager little boy said, “Oh, Mrs. Brown, I know, I know: faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”

Faith is neither a mindless nor a mindful enterprise. It is a matter neither of putting your brain on hold, nor of holding to be true only those things that you can fit into your brain. Faith is a matter of standing in awe in the face of Mystery, and trusting in the wisdom of that Mystery which is beyond anything that we can fully comprehend.

The story of the Transfiguration, and the variety of responses to the story, bring to mind 3 things that we *must* bear in mind - and in our *hearts* – if we are to have a faith that is alive and vital and real in the 21st century. These 3 things are: the irony of science, the power of story, and the mystery of God.

Science is ironic because it began as an enterprise that *glorified* God, but it became an endeavor that *limits* God. Science, of course, is the systematic study of the universe. It seeks to understand what the universe is made of and how it operates. Among the earliest scientists in the western world were biblically-trained monks in the so-called Dark Ages who firmly believed that God created the universe. If God created it, then it must be a worthy subject of human study. To study the *handiwork* of God is a way to *glorify* God.

Science began as a way to learn about Creation and give glory to the Creator. And *empirical* science – what we know as the scientific method – emerged as one of the tools in that enterprise; *one* of the tools. The handiwork of God is all around us. So scientists began to say, “Let’s observe what’s around us; let’s do experiments with what is around us. Let’s see how our observations and the results of our experiments compare with the observations and results of other scientists. As we pool our knowledge, we can learn more about the heavens and the earth that God has made. As we pool our knowledge of what can be seen, we will give glory to the One who cannot be seen.

So far, so good. But as the empirical approach to knowledge became the *only* tool of science, modern minds began to think that what is real is *only* what can be seen; and reality is only that which can be grasped with the mind. The objective of science became not glorifying God, but wrapping your mind around things that can be observed. And if any belief in God remained, it was a belief in a God that is small enough that I can grasp even God with my mind. Theology was once known as the queen of the sciences. But by the middle of the 20th century, most scientists wanted nothing to do with theology.

What began as an enterprise to glorify God became an endeavor that limits God. That’s the irony of science. But a person who has a scientific mind can still grasp the power of story. And that’s our second point: the power of story. Biblical stories point to a powerful Reality in and beyond the empirical world. Science helps us to understand what’s real, and biblical stories point us toward what’s *Really* Real. The Transfiguration is a story that is not *literally* true, but it points us toward the unseen Mystery that is *ultimately* True. And the power of such a story is that it can change us. The Risen Christ *comes* to us through such stories. The Risen Christ *speaks* to us through such stories. The key to this story is not the visual image of a Jesus clothed in dazzling white clothes, but the words of God who says, “This is my Son; *listen* to him!” The point of the story is not the transfiguration of Jesus, but the way in which the Word of God revealed *through* Jesus can transfigure *us*! The power of story is that it can change us. The power of story is that it can become a conduit through which the Holy Spirit can nurture us, and make us real. Tell me the stories of Jesus not just because I want to hear them, but also and especially because I want to become the person whom God has made me to be. I want to become my authentic self. These stories can help to make it so.

In order to illustrate the point, let me tell you a story. At Christmastime in 1984, I was one messed-up dude! Various events that fall had conspired against me, and sent me downward in a spiral of despair. I’d been a minister for more than 4 years by that time, but it’s hard to preach the good news of God’s love when you’re pretty sure that the universe hates you.

What helped to turn me around was hearing the story of Jesus’ birth in a way that I’d never heard it before. For years I’d been trying to distill out of the story those things that could be literally accepted and scientifically proven. So, the star and the angels were out but the homeless family and the stable were still in. But that Christmas more than 30 years ago I just let the story speak to me, the *whole* story. I didn’t care if it was literally true or a total fabrication. I just listened to the story. I just rejoiced in the wonder of the story. And I was touched by the wonder of God *through* the story. I was lifted out of that cesspool of despair by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit came to me because I stopped trying to change the story to something that I could fit into my puny little brain, and instead I let the story change *me*.

That’s the power of story; especially the power of biblical stories. It changes us, it transfigures us, it makes us real as it reveals to us the power of the One who is *Really* Real.

These stories reveal to us something of the God who is shrouded in mystery. They lift a little bit of that shroud and they reveal something of God to our minds, our hearts, our spirits, our whole being. But they reveal only a little bit. For we worship a God of mystery. Our scientific minds try to explain away the things of the Bible, while all the while the stories of the Bible are inviting us into the mystery of God.

God is so much bigger than we are. And a healthy appreciation of mystery opens us to a sense of awe. It’s a bit like the sense that you have when you view a beautiful mountain vista; but it’s more than that. It’s a bit like the sense that you have when you look at the stars on a clear summer night; but it’s even more than that. It’s a bit like facing an insurmountable problem, and suddenly things come together in a totally unexpected way, and there’s a way forward where there seemed to be no way. It’s all of that because these are all ways in which we are touched by the wonder of God. But it’s even more than that. There are no words. Sometimes, in the middle of a Bible story, or a walk in the woods, or a service of worship, or the depths of prayer, one is overcome with a sense of awe. It’s not *ir*rational, it’s *trans*-rational. That’s the beginning of the awareness of the knowledge of the mystery of God. You can’t fully understand it. You can’t fully explain it. All you can do is revel and rejoice and be at peace in the midst of such Mystery; and trust in the wisdom at the heart of such Mystery.

Peter, James and John are invited by Jesus into the Mystery. Up on the Mount of Transfiguration they are invited into the Mystery, but they step back in fear. They fail to trust. They don’t allow their hearts to be opened to the wonder of what they’re experiencing, so they aren’t transformed from fear to faith and trust. Instead, they try to understand. They try to box-up the experience into something that can be crammed into a little booth, a little house, a little mind. And Jesus tells them to tell no one, because he knows that they don’t get it, and he knows that if they tell someone they’ll misrepresent it. And we’re liable to make the same mistake. Unless we let the stories change us; unless we let the Spirit transfigure us into people who trust the Mystery, and stand in awe in the face of Mystery.

The renowned preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick said, “I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.” The Bible uses story and metaphor and symbol to point to that Mystery which is not just real, but Really Real. And it changes us. It transfigures us. And because the Son of Man has long since risen from the dead, we can tell everyone about it. Or we can at least use the stories of the Bible – like the story of the Transfiguration – to point to it, and to invite folks into the sense of awe that is worship. Amen.