

Defining Moments

II Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

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Jacob Copeland, a star football player from Pensacola, Florida, had a defining moment Wednesday. He has been touted as one of the best wide receivers in the country. Wednesday was National Signing Day, and he and other elite players had to decide where they will play football. The cameras were rolling live on ESPNU. Three caps sat before him on a table: Alabama, Tennessee, and Florida. His mother sat beside him wearing an Alabama shirt and a Tennessee toboggan, an indication that she would have been happy with either of those two schools. Jacob reached out, took the Florida cap, and put it on. That was his choice; he would play for Florida. The crowd applauded, but not his mother. Wearing her Alabama shirt and Tennessee toboggan, she stood up and walked away, showing her obvious disapproval. A defining moment suddenly became an awkward moment on life television. She did eventually come back and gave him a hug.

We've all had defining moments, haven't we? Those momentous occasions. The ones we will never forget. The moments that shaped who we are. It may have been your wedding. Your baptism. Birth of your children. When you earned a Ph.D. or some other degree. Maybe the day you were ordained or the day you retired. Defining moments.

If we could talk with Peter, James and John, I suspect they would tell us that the moment described in Mark 9 was a defining moment for them. Today we call it the Transfiguration of Jesus. One New Testament scholar argues that this moment is critical to Mark's gospel, where it is the second of the three major confessions of Jesus' identity (Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation*, p. 161). The first was at his baptism where God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The third was at the crucifixion when the centurion confessed, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Here the voice again confirmed, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Important? It was to Mark. Defining? It was to Peter, James and John.

Mark says that this event occurred “after six days,” probably referring to that dramatic occasion when Peter rebuked Jesus. Remember that? Jesus had been talking about his impending death. Peter didn’t like it and corrected Jesus, saying that this must never happen. Jesus then, knowing what must happen, said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” Six days after that Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus “up a high mountain.” There, Mark says, Jesus was transfigured or transformed, changed, before them. His clothes dazzled white, the text says, whiter than they could have been bleached. And suddenly two Old Testament figures were with Jesus: Elijah and Moses. Peter, frightened but wanting to be resourceful, offered to build three “dwellings,” three huts, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Before he could put on his tool belt, though, a cloud overshadowed them and a voice spoke from the cloud. Presumably the voice was that of God saying of Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And then suddenly everything returned to normal. The cloud disappeared. The mountain was just a mountain again. Moses and Elijah were gone. Jesus’ clothes no longer dazzled. As they walked back down the mountain, Jesus said something most interesting. He “ordered” them to tell no one about what had just happened until after his resurrection, giving rise to the so-called Markan Secret, the belief that Jesus wanted to keep secret that he was the Messiah.

That’s it, the Transfiguration. A bit of drama. A hint of science fiction. A whole lot of mystery. But what does it mean for us? Why did this become a defining moment?

Three things. *First, it was a defining moment because of what it reveals about Jesus.* Interestingly, people today tend to emphasize the divinity of Christ. We know the whole story, his miracles, his resurrection, the teachings of Paul and others about Jesus. We have systematized our theology over the ages so that we fairly easily affirm that Jesus was uniquely the Son of God. In fact, for some of us, it is harder to imagine him being fully human. It would have been just the opposite for the people of his day, including Peter, James and John. Jesus was just like them. He ate dinner every night. He had to stop along the way and rest, take a potty break, get away from the turmoil and stress occasionally. They saw Jesus as fully human and had a hard time imagining him being anything more than that. So this experience on the mountain, along with his baptism and crucifixion, confirmed that Jesus was more than what they could see. He was uniquely God’s son, the Beloved, One to whom they and the world should listen.

Moses and Elijah were there. They represented the Law of Moses and the prophets of Israel. Notice that, like Moses on Mt. Sinai before God, a cloud overshadowed Jesus too. Like Moses, Jesus also heard the voice of God. Like Moses when he came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, Jesus too shined. And like Elijah, Jesus would call God's people back to faithfulness to God. Like Elijah, Jesus would miraculously ascend to heaven. There's little doubt how a first century Jew would have understood this Transfiguration experience. Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the new Moses, the new Elijah, the intermediary between the people of God and God.

This was a defining moment for Peter, James and John because of what it reveals about Jesus. He wasn't just one of the guys. He was uniquely the Son of God.

Second, it was a defining moment because of how it affected Peter, James, and John. These three disciples functioned like the executive committee of the apostles. They were the inner circle. You may remember that a few chapters earlier they alone were with Jesus when he healed Jairus' daughter. They alone were with Jesus inside the Garden of Gethsemane. And here they alone were with Jesus at the Transfiguration. Mark notes that they were "terrified" and "did not know what to say." I'll bet! Surely this inner circle was beginning to realize that obeying ten commandments written on stone tablets was not all that God had in mind. The text seems to suggest that their fear was not so much about what they were losing, but about what they were finding. Some have called these kinds of moments "liminal," the in-between state, between life and death, between awake and sleep, when nothing really changes but everything is different. Life shifts and the world tilts. For Peter, James and John, the world shifted that day and before them stood not only Jesus their friend but Jesus their Christ. For the very first time they realized that while Jesus was one of them, he was something and someone greater than any of them.

Much later Peter, perhaps reflecting back on this day, wrote these words: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been *eyewitnesses of his majesty.*" That's right. Peter was an eyewitness. He was there. James wrote, "Draw near to God, and he will *draw near to you.*" He knew. God certainly drew near to him that day. And then John wrote, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and *we have seen*

his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John saw his glory dazzling before him.

This was a defining moment because of how it affected Peter, James and John. Yes, Jesus was one of them, but then he wasn’t. He was uniquely the Son of God.

Finally and most importantly, this event has the potential to be a defining moment for you and me. That’s the bottom line, isn’t it? What does this story mean for us? What has the Church seen here that warrants an annual observance, equal in some traditions to Christmas and Easter? Imagine the impact upon us if we were awakened every year to what Peter, James, and John experienced—that Jesus really was who he claimed to be and that he calls us to live as his disciples. The purpose of Transfiguration Sunday is to tap us on the forehead and say, “Wake up. Life is passing by. To whom are you being Christ? And who is seeing Christ in you?”

Transfiguration Sunday is ultimately about our story, of what happens to people like us when we hear an inner voice, are touched in a deep place, when you and I have a “liminal” experience and are awakened to the reality of the life of faith. It is about all those times we have been transfigured or transformed, changed, because we encountered something larger than us—a different way of thinking, of loving, of living, of being in this world. The Transfiguration story is about that moment in our lives when in fear we are forced to let go of what we think we know for a deeper and fuller truth. Those moments are the essence of religious faith, and they always become defining moments.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we do not want to miss a great opportunity. Today, this very day, awaken us to your call. Amen.