

THE VOICE ON THE MOUNTAIN

Mark 9:2 -9

February 22, 2009

(THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD)

**Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light...**

**Great God of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.**

My father had a vision, once. He could see himself standing in the pulpit on Sunday morning ... preaching the Word. It was right after he met my mother at Berea -- a little college in Kentucky, where the foothills of the Cumberlands meet the bluegrass region, the very heart of Kentucky. My mom was a student there in the nursing school. And he was ... I'm not sure *what* he was. He was working there at Berea, finishing up high school, and thinking about the army. And about biology, of course.

About *becoming* a biologist, I mean. And yet, somewhere in the midst of all that was this vision he had of becoming a minister. A Baptist, mind you.

And he had it all figured out, he said. He could go to seminary in Louisville at Southern. And my mother could work at one of the hospitals there and put him through school. And they would live happily ever after in the great commonwealth of Kentucky.

But it wasn't to be. For you see, my father's *real* calling was to be a biologist and a teacher, I think. "To teach children and youth," he used to say, "is to touch the future." So they got married, moved back here to West Virginia where my mom went to work at the old Raleigh Clinic in Huntington, so she could put dad through school - - through Marshall. And *he* worked, too, mind you. He had a little job on the side painting houses....

He may have painted your house one summer. And if he did, I should stop **here** and apologize to you on his behalf. Because he **was** from **Kentucky**, you know. Both ends of it, mind you. He was born in Harlan County, in the Cumberland mountains, of course, of Southeastern

Kentucky. But he grew up, for the most part, in an orphanage -- a children's home in out in Louisville. So he was full of Kentucky ... from one end to the other. (He even used to root for Kentucky in basketball ... against Duke! Isn't that awful? I mean, after all, doesn't the bible say something about an *unpardonable sin*?)

Well, anyway, being full of Kentucky -- and Harlan County -- made my dad do things a little differently than most other people. Not according to Hoyle, as some folks would say. The truth is he cut corners. Didn't do things by the book. So ... he was painting a house one day and it was hot. West Virginia, down-by-the-riverside-in-the-middle-of-August kind of hot. And there was nothing that could even be mistaken for a breeze. And he was hot, and weary. And he could see that he was going to have to go all the way down to the hardware store, on a bicycle, mind you, and buy some more paint, and then haul it all the way back ... and all just to paint one small section in the back of the house to finish the job.

And he looked down from the ladder where he was perched. And he noticed the water spigot there at the side of the house. And all of a sudden, he was inspired!

He'd just add a little water. [The] Stuff was kind of thick, anyway. So why not just thin it out a little, save the time and the hassle, and finish the job quick? ✕ He and his brother, Cline, used to do that when he was in college. They'd open up a can of vegetable soup -- Campbell's Alphabet, I suppose -- and they'd add **two** cans of water instead of just one. Which made it last longer, he said. Saved them time and money. So **that's** what he did with the paint that summer. He went to the spigot, turned on the water ... and it was like the wedding in Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine, only my dad turned the *paint* into *water*. Made it so thin it looked more like skim milk than paint.

And if there was a miracle to be found there it was that he didn't get caught. Because one good rain, you know, would rinse it away like the white shoe polish in the little glass bottle my mom would use to polish her white nurse's shoes. But he was lucky. The luck of the Irish, he used to say. And no one ever suspected a thing.

But his luck ran out ... all of a sudden, one day. Because there was a change in the weather ... and it came without warning. (Kind of like this past week.) Dark clouds

gathered above. And the wind started blowing. And the leaves on the trees turned belly up, as if they couldn't wait to drink in a little rain. And he started painting faster and faster, praying to God with all of his heart to let the storm pass, so that *his* sin might **not** be washed away. Which is not the kind of prayer God usually gets, I'm sure. And all of a sudden, the lightning flashed so close he could smell it, he said. And the thunder cracked and roared. And my dad thought he was a goner! "This is it," he thought. "This is how I'm going to go out. Fried and fricasseed like a piece of chicken in a parsonage on a Sunday afternoon."

And at *that* moment, he says, all of those old feelings came flooding back into his soul. And he saw what he had done. ✘ Here was a young man who had thought about the ministry once, cutting corners. Cheating. Making money at the expense of some poor West Virginian! So he jumped down from the ladder, fell on his knees, and started praying. "Oh, Lord," he prayed, "forgive me. I don't know what got into me. Forgive me. Please, please Lord forgive me." ✘ And he took his prayer a step further. "Lord," he said, "I want to do what's right, Lord. I want to fix this. Really, I do. Just show me how?"

And everything fell silent. All was calm and still. And then out of dead silence, the lightning flashed and lit up the whole place. And at that same moment the thunder cracked and roared, deep and loud. And he heard a voice, the same voice he had heard in his heart when he thought about going to seminary. Only this time, he said, it was loud and clear. **"Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more! ✘"**

I'm sorry. I just ... I just couldn't resist it. And to tell you the *truth* something a lot like that happened to Peter, the Rock. And to James and John, **the sons of thunder**, Jesus called them. Because they did a little climbing, too, you know. But not with a ladder and a bucket of watery paint. It was a different kind of climbing those three fishermen did. For they went to the mountaintop with Jesus to pray. To spend time there with God.

And I have a feeling they thought it was about time that he did. Because Jesus had been acting a little strange lately. Six days earlier he told them, pretty much, that he was the Messiah. The Christ. The Anointed, it means. Son of the living God. And they had been waiting for this. Lots of folks had. Most of Israel had been waiting for the Messiah to come and set them free and give the Kingdom

back to God and God's people -- where it belonged. And be done with those pesky Romans and all of their taxes! But that same day -- six days earlier -- Jesus turned right around and told them that people were going to make him suffer and die. (He also told them he'd be raised up on the third day). But they couldn't get past the dying part. How can God's son die? God wouldn't let that happen to him? Peter said **he** wouldn't let it happen. He'd do something about it! And that's when Jesus said, "You all have to die. If you want to be **my** disciples, it'll cost you your life. You'll have to take up your own cross and come follow me." How did that make any sense?

So it was good that Jesus wanted to pray. Spend some time on the mountaintop listening to God. Get himself re-energized. Revived and renewed. And then he could do what (they thought) God would want him to do.

And there on the mountain they had a vision. They saw Jesus as they'd never seen him before. His clothes were white -- whiter than anybody on earth could bleach them. Bright and glowing, whiter than white. And white was sign in those days. It was a symbol of holiness. Clean and Pure. And in those days white was the color of victory! It

was a sign, they thought. They were right! Jesus was who they thought he was. The one who would bring in God's kingdom on earth. The truth is they saw Jesus in all of his glory. As John said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In the Greek it says, "The Word became flesh and **pitched his tent** with us" -- he made his dwelling, his home here with us. And we beheld his glory -- the glory as of the Father's only Son."

So there he was in all of his glory. And as if that wasn't enough, they could see two other men with him -- Moses the lawgiver, mind you. And the great prophet Elijah. And they both pointed to Jesus -- the law, the commandments, the first five books of the bible. The Torah, they called it. And the prophets who told of his coming.

Can you imagine? Peter and the others were just overwhelmed. They'd never seen anything like it. They'd never felt so close to God as they did beholding his glory on top of the mountain. They were excited and nervous and scared -- so full of emotion they didn't know what to do or even say. And finally Peter blurted out, "Lord, it's so good to be here. If you want, we can pitch three tents here -- not just tents, we can build three *shrines* here on

the mountain. One for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah!”

Talk about being on the mountaintop ... Peter was there. Peter and James and John were on the top of the world! And they wanted to linger a bit and soak it all in. Because this was it. This was what it was all about -- not all that business about suffering and dying Jesus gave them down in the valley. This is where God wanted them to be.

But then all of a sudden the clouds rolled in. And from the cloud came a Voice. And the Voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved. **LISTEN TO HIM.**” And when they looked around there was no one there -- no one but Jesus. The very same Jesus who’d been with them all along. The same Jesus who told them to take up their cross and follow him. “Listen to **him**, said the Voice. Listen to him.” Follow where he leads you. Do what he tells you. Be the disciples he calls you to be.

And then Jesus led them down from the mountain and into the valley -- to touch the sick and the bruised and the broken. To feed the hungry and care for God’s people. To bring hope from despair, and light in the darkness, and life

to the people who dwell in the shadow of death. And it wasn’t easy. It put them at risk. And there were times when they were nervous and frightened. And yet there was joy -- deep, abiding, life-giving joy. Because Jesus was with them -- the same Jesus they had seen in all of his glory. The Son of the Living God, the Word made flesh who has pitched his tent here with us.

**Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light...**

Well, here we are on this mountaintop. On the hill in South Charleston with Jesus our Lord. And just as God spoke to Peter and James and John on *that* mountaintop, God speaks to us. Do you hear? And the word, the message he gives us is exactly the same. And that word is **LISTEN. Listen ... with all of your heart. Turn your hearts, your lives, together to me and listen. Listen for my word. Listen for my Voice. Listen to what I have to say to you -- to this church on this mountain. And let me love you, and lead you, and make of you what I will -- so that you -- First Church -- may touch the sick and the bruised and the**

broken here in this place and all around you. So that you, First United Methodist Church, may feed the hungry and care for my people here in this place. And bring hope from despair, and light in their darkness, and life to the people who dwell in the shadow of death. Listen. Let me speak to your heart. Let me speak to you about where I will send you and what I will call you to be as a church and do together in my name. Listen.

And during these forty days of Lent, that's what we hope and plan and pray we will do together. God is calling us as a church to listen. So as we journey through these forty days we're asking you to think about that and to talk about that in every group, in every class, in every gathering, and meeting, and service we share in. Think about this: **What do you hear God saying to us here at First Church? What is God asking us to do and to be? Where is God calling us? What does God want for this church?** You see ... it's all about God. Not what do you want? Or what are your likes and dislikes. Because it's not about us. It's all about God.

And I believe that if we will listen to what God is saying, if we will follow where God leads us, nothing will be

impossible for us. Because God will be with us. And because God is with us we can touch the hearts and lives of the people he loves so very much.

Not so long ago, I wanted to quit. Have I ever told you this? The church, I thought, would be better off if I just quit. Left the ministry. Threw in the towel ... or the stole, I suppose. "The church isn't growing," I thought. (As if growth is something you can only measure in numbers.) "And I know why, I thought. It's me. I'm not such a good preacher. Not such a good a leader. I can't make people get **excited** about church -- can't make them want to tell other people about Jesus or bring them to church. I can't stop people from getting hurt or even from hurting other people. I just can't do it. I don't have what it takes.

Maybe I should be a writer, I thought. Maybe I should teach music in grade school. Maybe I should just do what I'm good at and drive a cab or a coal truck or something. And it went on and on. Couldn't stop thinking about it. What should I do? I need some answers.

How about a sign, Lord? **Show me** what you want me to do. But if there was a sign, I didn't see it. "What can I

do to turn things around, Lord? What can I say to make the church be **everything you want it to be? How can I please them, Lord? What can I do?**”

I have to tell you, I didn't get any answers. So I went to the **mountain**. To the hill is more like it. But I went. It's in Indiana. My favorite place in the world to go and pray and talk and try to figure things out. For there on the tip top of the tallest hill in Perry County is a church. Some monks from Switzerland built it 154 years ago. And it's away from the road. And away from town. And away from the monastery where I go on retreat. And it's surrounded by a beautiful meadow. It's quiet and peaceful. And that's where I went.

And I went there every day for a week and sat outside the church on a bench. They have services outside there in the summers. So there are wooden park benches arranged like pews on the lawn. And there is a giant cross there with a life-size figure of Jesus. And there's even a pulpit there on the lawn -- a beautiful sculpted stone pulpit (shaped a lot like this pulpit.)

So I'd sit there for hours and think and write and pray -- hoping to come up with some kind of answer to all of those questions. What should I do? Should I hang it all up? Should I throw in the towel? And if I don't, Lord, what can I do? What can I say to the church, Lord, to help them be the church you really want them to be?

And ... nothing happened. There wasn't a sign. No flash of lightning. No voice from the cloud. No transfiguration anywhere that I could see. Nothing. Nothing at all. I remember staring down at my shoelaces for the longest time and shaking my head. And just as I was ready to get up and go. I looked up at that big stone pulpit. And I saw the same words carved across the top of it that I had seen every day. The words are from the second chapter of John, the fifth verse. They're the words Mary spoke to the servants at the wedding in Cana, right after she told Jesus they had no more wine. “Do whatever he tells you.”

And that was it. I was looking for a sign, a lighting bolt, a clap of thunder, some once-and-for-all, clear-as-a-bell, beyond-all-doubt kind of answer. But there it was all along. Do whatever he tells you. It's like saying, “Listen to

him.” Listen to him. Not once. Not someday. But always. **Keep** listening. And do whatever **he** tells you -- **today** and **tomorrow** and **the day after that**.

And the only way to do that is to let him speak. Let him speak -- listen for his word in **the scriptures** each day. Be still and listen in **prayer**. Listen. Listen to him everyday. Keep your ears turned to his word and his voice in all that you do.

So, I can't tell you something that will make you want to fill the church. I can't say something that will excite you and cause you to want to leave here and tell everybody you know about Jesus. I can't say anything that will transform the church. All I can do is pass on to you what I have received and say simply, “Listen to him... And do whatever he tells you.” Today and tomorrow and the next day and the next. Do whatever he tells you to do.” And trust that wherever he leads you, he will be with you.

**Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light...**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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