

The Kingdom of God Arrives Full Force

Mark 9: 2-9

I shared with everyone a few weeks ago that the story of the prophet Samuel was one of my favorite Bible stories. Well, today, I have a confession to make. The story of the Transfiguration is one of my least favorite Bible stories. I know it seems unlikely that a preacher would be telling you this because you know we are supposed to treat all the stories in the Bible the same, never showing favorites, showing the same respect to all these wonderful life changing stories. Okay, forget thinking like that. We all, including the preachers, we all have our favorite Bible stories, and yes it is true, we also have our least favorite stories as well.

And the story of the Transfiguration is one of my least favorite stories. Maybe that's because I didn't grow in a church that necessarily lifted up the Transfiguration as a moment of importance. Or maybe, if I'm telling the truth, this story is one of least favorite bible stories for the simple fact that I don't get it. I don't understand it. One minute, Jesus is a normal guy, taking a hike up a mountain with three of his buddies and then the next moment, boom. The sky is opening, Jesus is shiny and dazzling white, standing there with Moses and Elijah. And then just as quickly, just as strangely, poof, Jesus is a normal guy again,

looking around at the others, going, “What? Oh that, that’s just the Kingdom of God coming in full force. Don’t worry about that. Y’all aren’t ready for. The world’s not ready for it. So let’s just keep it a secret.”

Yes, I know all the important Bible references embedded in this story, references like this moment on the mountaintop for Jesus is similar to Moses’ experience on the mountaintop with God. And yes, I get that Jesus being with Moses and Elijah is significant sort of like Mark’s way of telling his readers that Jesus is the real deal. I know all of that but I still don’t understand the story. This story leaves me asking the question, what are we supposed do with this story. It is confusing. It defies logic. It is full of mystery and to be honest, this story leaves my head hurting. What are we supposed to do as people of faith with the story of the Transfiguration?

Well, I can tell you over the years, there have been many answers to this question but for the most part, we as people of faith have handled the story of the Transfiguration in one of two ways. We have either ignored it, pretended that it is just one more crazy story in the Bible and the turned the page, hoping to find a story we liked better and could understand more clearly or like Peter, we turned the moment of the Transfiguration into a photo op with our pal, Jesus.

Like Peter, over the years, we as people of faith have experienced the Kingdom of God in our lives and we have been amazed at its presence in our lives. Like Peter, over the years, we as people of faith have experienced the Kingdom of God in our lives and thinking, hoping that nothing will ever take away that moment, that experience, thinking that nothing will ever compare to that moment, that experience, we have tried to capture it. We have tried to hold it in time just like it is. We have built buildings and designed programs just to capture that experience of the Kingdom of God and then have done everything in our power to recapture that one moment, that one experience over and over again, even to the point of forsaking the opportunities of meeting new moments with the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Like Peter, over the years, we have tried to capture that one moment, tried to stay on that mountaintop, and pretend that everything is good and right with the world. Because now, all that matters is that one moment, that one experience with the Kingdom of God, now that we have that, and we know nothing ever, ever will compare to that one moment again, what else do we need? We can stay confined in our buildings. We can stay in our pews. We can keep our faith the same way, because all that matters is that we have experienced the Kingdom of God and nothing will ever compare to that first moment we encountered it.

But we all know that can't happen. That's why Jesus tells the disciples they have to come down the mountain. The world moves on. Time moves on. Life move on and we are just stuck.

The reality of it is that we can't capture or hold moments still in time, and expect things not to change around us. Life moves on. Time moves on. And we are called to move on with it.

Sounds easy right?

I will tell you for years, every time I have read this story, I have been critical of Peter's behavior in this story. I've said things like, "Man, that guy is slow to understand. There he is, standing with the Son of God, experiencing the Kingdom of God at full force, and all he wants to do is build monuments to the moment. All Peter wants to do is pull out his selfie stick, strike a pose with his three buddies and then post the picture to Instagram. For years, every time I have read this story, I have been critical of Peter's behavior, that is until this year.

Because this year, as I was reflecting upon this Scripture, I happened to look upon a shelf in my house and saw my own selfie picture with a young girl from Nicaragua.

It was in that moment, in the seeing of that picture, I knew just like Peter, I had missed the moment when the Kingdom of God had hit me with full force. In

seeing that picture, seeing the young girl's confused face next to my smiling one, I knew that once again I had missed the point of the story of the Transfiguration and I didn't like the feeling.

Let me explain: This selfie picture was taken long before the word "selfie" existed. It was taken during my seminary years on a trip to Nicaragua. Now this trip was not a vacation but rather a mission trip. And yes it was designed to do all the things mission trips are supposed to do like push the participants out of their comfort zones, open our eyes to a wider understanding, force the participants to see that not everyone lives in relative comfort and privilege that we take for granted.

Don't get me wrong. I am not criticizing mission trips at all. I firmly believe that they are an essential part of our faith development and I strongly suggest that no matter what age we are, all of us should at one time or another go on a mission trip just so we can see the world differently.

What I am offering up is that for me this picture from my mission trip to Nicaragua represents that in ways more than one, I didn't allow the trip to change me at all. I turned this amazing experience into a photo op rather than allowing myself or forcing myself to realize that Kingdom of God was right there, in front of me, in full force, just waiting for me to really open my heart, my mind, my spirit to its transforming power.

Here is why I say this. I took the picture as a memento of the trip and I placed it on a shelf, where for years it has been collecting dust. If I had really opened my eyes, opened my heart, opened my spirit to the Kingdom of God in that moment, I would have come back from that trip changed, transformed. I would have come home, agitated that this little girl would never be able to receive an education more than eighth grade. If I had really opened myself to being transformed by the power of the Kingdom of God, I would have come home, irritated that clean water was not always available for her and her family. If I had really opened myself to the startling opportunity of experiencing the Kingdom of God in its Full Force, I would have come home, angry that poverty was ravaging her country while abundance and waste is prevalent in mine.

If I had really opened myself up to the moment, and heard God's voice speaking to me, saying, "This is my child", I would have come home, inspired and passionate about working to help make the Kingdom of God a reality for all of God's children.

But instead of that, I took a photo, a selfie with me, smiling, standing with a young girl as a memento of the trip and placed the photo on a shelf where it has been and still is collecting dust. But instead of being transformed by the Kingdom of God that reflected in the little girl's eyes, I came home and slipped easily back into my comfortable, secure, privileged life.

For years, every time I have read this story, I have been critical of Peter's behavior, of Peter's reaction on that mountain top until I looked upon that shelf and saw the moment in which I too reduced the transforming, life-giving power of the Kingdom of God into a photo op.

Maybe that's why I really don't like this story. It convicts me. It reminds me of this moment and of all the moments in which I missed or ignored the Kingdom of God arriving in full force in front of me. It reminds me that I have turned my encounters with the Son of the Living God into mementos instead of allowing them to transform me and change me into the person God created me and calls me to be.

You see what I have come to realize is that one of the reasons we like to ignore this story or turn it into a photo op is that this story reminds us that the Kingdom of God defies our logic. It won't stay in our neatly defined lines. It won't stay in the boxes we create to contain it.

The story of the Transfiguration reminds us that the Kingdom of God requires something from us when we encounter it fully. It requires a change in us. It requires a change in the way we speak, in the way we interact with others. Experiencing the Kingdom of God full requires a change in the way we live. And let's face it, isn't it just easier to ignore the Kingdom of God or turn it into something frivolous so that we don't have to change.

As people of faith, we know that when we encounter the Kingdom of God, whether it comes to us in simple ways or hits us in between the eyes full force, we know that when we encounter the Kingdom of God, it is a call for transformation, a call for a change in our life's direction. And that change, that transformation is hard. It requires something from us. It makes us realize that discipleship is not a one and done moment. Discipleship is not something that will fit neatly in our calendars or just be something on our to do list that we can mark off easily or quickly.

Each and every time we encounter the Kingdom of God, it reminds us that discipleship is a way of life, a way of being. It reminds us that discipleship is about changing ourselves so that we can change the world. And that doesn't come easily or without complications. Discipleship is messy and calls us to leave our places of security and safety.

Discipleship calls us to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is among the people of God and to do that, we might have to talk to people we are not comfortable talking to or interacting with. To proclaim that the Kingdom of God is among the people of God, we may have to break out of our routine, leave the four walls of the church, or heaven forbid, talk about how God's love has changed our own lives.

Discipleship calls us as people of faith to bring healing and wholeness to all

of God's children, and to do that, we may actually have to put aside some of our preconceived notions and be in relationship with others.

Now, the preacher is just talking crazy. Now the preacher is just meddling.

You're right. No one ever said discipleship was easy. We only have to look at the example Jesus gave us to see that is true. Jesus certainly stirred up the powers that be during his time on earth and yes, Jesus' meddling got him into some sticky situations.

But, that's the example he gave to us to follow as his disciples. Jesus' ministry here on earth was to bring the Kingdom of God near for all of God's children and that would have been impossible to do if he had simply ignored the moments when the Kingdom of God arrived in full force or had simply turned them into photo ops with his adoring fans.

Jesus came to show the world that there is another way. Jesus came to bring new life to all of God's creation. Jesus came to transform the world. And it all started that moment when the voice of God said, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

You see, the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is not about the secrets of life. It is not about the moment when Jesus discloses the secrets of the universe. It is about the moment, the experience that can happen when we truly listen to Jesus and allow the life giving, life changing, life transfiguring Kingdom of God to enter fully into our lives.

When we do, we realize that everything has changed and we cannot go back to the way we were before. We cannot go back to seeing the world the way we saw it before. Nor do we want to because that moment, that experience changes everything...from the way we act, from the way we speak, from the way we interact with others, to the things we buy, to the way we live our life, just to name a few. Experiencing the Kingdom of God in our lives changes everything, including us. It transforms us and challenges us to be the person God created us and calls us to be.

This past week, it was announced that the American hostage, Kayla Mueller was killed. It has been interesting to see how this young woman has been portrayed in the media but what has been more interesting are the comments posted about her through social media. Comments have ranged from “She should have said in the United States where she would have been safe” to “She had to know the risks she was taking when she went over there.”

Once again, just like the story of the Transfiguration, as people of faith, we don't know what we are supposed to do with this story. It defies our logic. And it doesn't fit into the nicely designed boxes we use to order our world. I will be the first to say that I am uncomfortable with Kayla Mueller's story for so many reasons. I am uncomfortable with her story because she was killed and held hostage. I am uncomfortable with her story because she died so young.

I am also uncomfortable with Kayla's story because once again, I see her story being responded to by people of faith in one of two ways. As people of faith, we either don't want to deal with it. We try to ignore that her passion in faith convicts all of us of preferring safety and security over an active faith or as people of faith, we have turned Kayla Mueller into a presence larger than life which trivializes her ministry and calling.

Kayla Mueller's passion for children of God, her faith in action defies our logic. And it doesn't fit into our nicely designed boxes that we use to order our world. Kayla Mueller's story makes us uncomfortable in more than one way.

Now, I will tell you that I don't know if I have any easy answers to her story or to her death but what I do know is that Kayla Mueller was a person, a person of deep faith who at some point in time in her life experienced the Kingdom of God at Full force and it changed her life.

My only hope is that one day I too will have such an experience and that it leaves me transformed into the person God calls me to be.

May this be all of our hope as well. Amen.