

## LOVE WINS – MARK

### More to learn.

Last week we got to the part in Mark's gospel where Mark writes about Jesus, Peter, James and John up a mountain. It was up the mountain that Peter, James and John had an extraordinary experience. Mark tells us that up the mountain, Jesus was transfigured and his clothes became dazzling white. Up the mountain Moses and Elijah appeared. Peter, James and John were frightened, Mark tells us. A voice from a cloud spoke to them and pronounced: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him." (Mark 9 v 7)

Much has been written about what we call the transfiguration, and what it means. Perhaps one of the simplest ways to understand it, is that in these moments up the mountain, the disciples Peter, James and John are given a glimpse of who Jesus really is. Jesus is, simply, God's son, and God loves his son. It is, perhaps, another opportunity for these disciples to see Jesus and grasp the truth about him.

However much Peter, James and John did, or didn't grasp what was happening up the mountain – and it seems mostly they didn't – it must have been an extraordinary experience. Maybe, in some way, in those moments, they felt a little closer to God, however they understood it. Maybe in some way, in those moments, they felt a little removed from the troubles and struggles of the world, and all they'd left down the mountain. Maybe, in some way, in those moments, they might have described the experience as a deeply spiritual moment.

Jesus told them, on the way down the mountain, not to tell anyone what they'd seen, which must have left them wondering.

Friends, sometimes we too might have mountaintop experiences. Sometimes, we too know in a different and profound way, the presence of God. Friends, sometimes, we too hear God speak to us in a new way. Perhaps, sometimes, we too are deeply aware of the great and magnificent love of God for us, or for others.

It might happen when we're reading the Bible and we see something we've never seen before. It might be when God reminds us of something we've known for a long time but lost sight of. It might be when someone prays with

us or for us. It might be at a conference, when we take time out to think and reflect. It might be in a Sunday morning service at CBC, or any other church. We might not always understand what God is saying or doing, but we know his presence.

Friends, hold onto those mountaintop experiences with all your heart. Friends, never let go in the darkness what God has taught you in the light! And the mountaintop experiences are light – something of who God really is.

For Peter, James and John, their mountain top experience doesn't make sense until much later, probably not until after the trauma of Jesus' death and resurrection. Maybe the same will be true for us – understanding will take time.

The truth about mountain top experiences is that they don't last!

Jesus, Peter, James and John come back down the mountain and things are about to get tough.

<sup>14</sup> When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. <sup>15</sup> As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

<sup>16</sup> "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

<sup>17</sup> A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. <sup>18</sup> Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

<sup>19</sup> "You unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

<sup>20</sup> So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

“From childhood,” he answered. <sup>22</sup> “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

<sup>23</sup> “‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

<sup>24</sup> Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

<sup>25</sup> When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

<sup>26</sup> The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

<sup>28</sup> After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

<sup>29</sup> He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer. (Mark 9 v 14-29)

No sooner than they came down the mountain from their great experience, trouble is looming. They walk straight into an argument between the other disciples and the teachers of the law. They are arguing about who is right and who is wrong. The disciples have evidently been unable to heal a boy possessed by a demon. It appears they get into an argument about their failure with the teachers of the law. The crowd, the ordinary people, are watching.

I wonder how much time we, the church, spend arguing about who is right and who is wrong, while the world is watching? While the church argues about what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s the right way to act and what’s the wrong way to act, who is in, and who is out, who has the right belief and who has the wrong belief, the world continues to suffer. People continue to live in poverty, suffer abuse, are discriminated against, are exploited. How many people have, in truth, left the church, or been put off the church, because it appears the church is more interested in winning arguments than demonstrating love. And that maybe, is the crunch.

Maybe here, in this encounter, where Jesus will heal a boy possessed by a demon, we see a deep and profound truth: love matters more. Above all the arguments, the debate, the failure and the reasons for it, love matters more.

How are we doing here in CBC? Does love matter more than our views, beliefs, theology and who is right and who is wrong?

This encounter throws out perhaps, two challenging things for us to wrestle with. Faith and Prayer.

The father has enough faith to bring his son to Jesus. He actually says: "I brought you my son – but your disciples couldn't drive out the spirit!" He later says: "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Then he says "I do believe, help my unbelief." Bottom line, he's not certain about anything! Jesus tells him that everything is possible for one who believes.

My best guess is that all this sits somewhat awkwardly with us. Actually, some of us might be quite angry as we read these things, because our experience is very different. Jesus, at least, seems to be saying that if you believe he can heal, then it is done!

But, we know that's not true – don't we? We would say we believe, but healing didn't come. Ok, here are some thoughts....

It could mean that Jesus is talking about himself when he says 'for one who believes' in that Jesus is the one who believes. That would make a lot of sense and mean its not about how much faith the father has. It could mean 'Everything is possible if only you have the right amount of faith.' That's quite damning for us, don't you think? Because, it means mostly, we don't!

Perhaps a much better way to understand it is Jesus means something like: "Everything is possible if you have faith in what I can do for you." The main thing here is that any miracle isn't dependant on the amount or quality of the father's faith, but much more on trusting himself to what Jesus is all about. I find that helpful and releasing: it's not about the amount or quality of my faith, but about who Jesus is. Doubt is the growing edge of faith: I do believe, help my unbelief.

But people don't always get healed, do they? Even if that's what Jesus can do. We could appeal to mystery – God's ways are not our ways and we just have to be content that God knows what he's doing. We could say God allows things to happen that we, simply, will never understand. We could heat ourselves up

thinking we've done something wrong, not had enough faith, or prayed in the wrong way. We could, as many have, walk away from faith and God because it is too hard, or unfair, or even cruel.

Perhaps, in all the pain and struggle, what we can do in all the unanswered questions, is to trust our loved ones to the great and magnificent love of God. To trust them into his hands, because God has them and holds them. To hold onto the deep and profound truth that God welcomes them into the kingdom of the heavens, with a twinkle in his eye.

Equally challenging perhaps is that Jesus tells the disciples: 'this kind can only come out by prayer.'

We have prayed and nothing has happened, at least not what we prayed for. My best guess is we all struggle with this thing called prayer. And maybe even now as I'm talking about it, we feel uncomfortable. We've tried the prayer thing, we've tried really hard.... But. Perhaps Jesus is talking here not so much about specific prayers, but of a way of being. Perhaps, Jesus is talking here more about a way of life that brings a sense of complete dependence on God – from which many prayers will come.

Henri Nouwen describes prayer as “a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God and of proclaiming our basic belief that all is grace, and nothing is simply the result of hard work.” The father comes to Jesus feeling completely helpless and inadequate. And, maybe, God can speak to us more clearly, and use us more fruitfully, when we are keenly aware of our own inadequacy for the moment.

Perhaps, as Jesus talks with the disciples after the events of the encounter, he is encouraging his disciples to, as Brother Lawrence has said, practice the presence of God, rather than think it's all about the big moment. But here again, we may find, that sometimes, in all that we pray for, with all its pain and struggle, what we can do, is to trust ourselves and our loved ones to the great and magnificent love of God. To trust that he holds, loves and cares for us and them, in all things and that we, and they, are welcome in his kingdom of the heavens.

It's quite a contrast: the mountaintop to the struggle and reality of everyday life. Truth is, we cannot live on the mountain top. We live down the mountain in the reality of everyday life.

As I prepared this talk, I noticed something that is both simple and obvious but also deep and profound. It is, in truth, something I already know but was reminded of as I wrote: Jesus is as present down the mountain, in the struggle of real life as he is up on the mountaintop. It is true that he appears very differently up on the mountaintop than he does when healing a demon possessed boy, but it is the same Jesus.

Could the same be true for us?

It is, of course different for us in that Jesus is not physically present with us either in our mountaintop experiences, or in our everyday lives. But, precisely because he is not present physically, he gave the gift of the Holy Spirit who is present, always and everywhere.

Friends, I hope that you may now, even in these moments, experience the mountaintop. The time when you are assured of God's divine presence in your life or your situation. The time when you know God is drawing close. The time when you know his encouragement, his compassion, his love, when you see him for who he really is. And when you do, hold onto it with all your heart.

But friends, I hope you will also know that God is as present in the everyday struggles that everyday life brings. That you will choose to trust he is present when faith is a struggle or absent, when prayer seems to go unanswered, when fear, anxiety, uncertainty, worry and doubt shout at you. Perhaps the encouragement from the experience of the mountaintop and the reality of life, is to, in every season, hold on, and hold before us the deep and profound truth that love is at the centre and love matters more.

Friends, I have come to realise, that this community, CBC, has probably everything we've thought about, this and more, right now. We hold, in this community, great faith and no faith, confidence in prayer and great disappointment in prayer, wonderful experiences of God's presence, and an overwhelming sense of God's absence, highly developed theological understanding, and no understanding at all, a desire to go on with God and a desperate feeling of hanging on by the skin of our teeth, life that is good and energising, life that is draining and threatening, a deep desire to know God, and a wondering if God is even bothered. And in all that we are and bring, God is present.

So, how are we doing? How are you doing?

Perhaps, if Jesus was to sum up what we've read today for us now, he might say something like: "Friends, set no limits on God, but trust yourself again, to his great and magnificent love."

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by Rev. Ian Phillips.