

Encountering the Numinous

Mark 9: 2-8

It's a Celebration Sunday! We celebrate Transfiguration Sunday today with the Christian Church around world. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent: a season to focus on the meaning of Jesus' path to the cross and a time of preparation for the celebration of Easter.

Transfiguration Sunday comes from a curious story in Mark's gospel. It is found in all four biblical gospels. This story is so important to the Church's story, that it marks the transition of the Church year from the focus on Jesus' life to the focus on Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. It also marks place in each of the gospels, just before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem.

This is mystical story about a mystical experience in Jesus' life and the lives of three of his disciples as they encounter the numinous! The four of them ascend a mountain and, as he prays, Jesus is transfigured. His appearance changes. His face is glowing with divine glory.

The three disciples witness him standing with Moses and Elijah, the two great figures of the Jewish faith: Moses the giver of Torah and Elijah the quintessential prophet. It is a curious unfolding of the story. Elijah and Moses seem so essential to the narrative, yet they are quickly dismissed in favor of Jesus.

Many scholars see this as a resurrection appearance even before crucifixion. Jesus is declared to be the beloved Son, intimate in relationship with God. Jesus is *glorified* prior to the resurrection. The gospel accounts actually bathe the events of the passion and crucifixion within the context of Jesus glorification.

It is an encounter with the numinous for Jesus and for the disciples. Peter, James, and John respond with fear. They don't understand, even as the cloud of God's glory surrounds them.

This story is rich with meaning. That meaning seems clear as it applies to Mark's community in the seventh decade of the first century, some thirty-five years or more after Jesus crucifixion. The message is that Jesus is the central figure. Hear him! The way of Jesus is much more important than Moses or Elijah.

Jesus encounters the numinous, the Holy and mysterious, several times in the gospels. Peter, James, and John have their mystical experience through Jesus. Mystical experience lies at the heart of faith for each of us.

What is mystic experience? It is a particular awareness, a sense or perception of connecting to the deeper realities of existence. The title of this sermon is *Encountering the Numinous*. An encounter with the numinous, the Holy, begins each journey of faith and also marks the point along the way at which each journey deepens.

This is the last in a six-part sermon series call *The Nuts and Bolts of Christian Living*. The series began with the story of Samuel listening to God with the help of his mentor, the priest Eli. The series concludes with the story of three disciples listening to God and experiencing the Holy through their friend and teacher Jesus.

The premise in this series is that each person's journey of faith begins with some type of experience of the Holy. In some way, each of us perceives the divine presence touching our awareness either directly or through a person or community that we touch.

We can respond to these experiences in one of two ways. We can ignore it and pretend it never happened, or at least not do anything with it. A second option is that we can choose to follow a path of learning or discipleship. Christians call this option choosing to "follow Christ".

In the flow of this sermon series, as we follow on the journey of the faith, we gradually find our voice -- what we have to say or sing or do with our lives. On the journey, we learn to embrace freedom, unconditional love with no strings attached. We also learn to seek the spiritual discipline that is vital to living faith freely, with passion and depth. On the journey, we again encounter the numinous, as at the start. Yet, we are changed. The encounter takes place at a deeper level. The process recycles more fully, with more of ourselves engaged.

Everyone on a journey of faith has some experience, some encounter, with the Holy, the sacred, the numinous. Our faith rests on these encounters. Our theology and belief systems are efforts to affirm, or create, a context in which our experience has meaning. It makes no sense to fight about theology -- who's right. Theology needs to be firmly grounded, but it also needs to be flexible as new experience comes and as we grow.

Jesus' experience of the numinous in his life -- in times of prayer, in the wilderness of temptation, in healing encounters with people -- were the touchstones of his entire ministry. The apostle Paul's encounter with the living Christ on the Damascus road not only turned his life around, it became the basis of his entire ministry. Both Jesus and Paul were mystical people.

Mystics experience God first hand through decisive religious experience (according to author William James). These experiences can be "dramatic, extraordinary states of consciousness, ...entering into another level of reality". They can also be less dramatic "communion with and union with the divine," sometimes with eyes open and sometimes with eyes closed.

Mystical experiences involve discovering new knowledge or artistic, aesthetic experience. They often include intimate and deep knowing of another person or of nature or of the self in relationship (Paul Tillich).

Some characteristics of mystical experience include:

- a. They can only be described by images and descriptions tend to be hazy.
- b. The experiences are brief. They come, then are gone.
- c. They are received rather than achieved.
- d. There is a sense of knowing something not known before.
- e. They are transformative. You are changed as a result.

(William James)

Mystics are people who have had mystical experiences. As a result, they understand God as being "right here" as well as more than here. They have a sense that everything is in God. I encourage you to trust in your mystical experience, whatever its shape. It is the ground on which God meets you.

Today is Celebration Sunday at Crossroads Church. We celebrate today the achievement of a dream. It's a step many thought, and feared, would never take place. Today is also the seventh anniversary of the birth of this congregation as a distinct body of people. Today, we celebrate our arrival in a church house to call home. This is something of a mystical experience for this body of people.

Earlier in this service, we sang the song “Out of the Wilderness”. The words remind us that when the children of Israel stepped out of their wilderness wandering into the Promised Land, their real work began – to live as God’s people. When Jesus stepped out of the wilderness of temptation, his ministry began. When each of us stepped across the threshold of this building this morning, we marked the affirmation of a dream accomplished. It was also the first step of a new phase in our journey

I’m looking forward to lots of things here. I’m looking forward to our using this building to touch this neighborhood with God’s love and inclusiveness. I’m looking forward to welcoming people from the north, south, east, and west to worship here. We’ll build bridges of partnership in community and share meals. We’ll gather here for dialogues about faith, drama productions, art fairs, coffee houses, and workshops. People will find here welcoming arms and challenging ideas.

I’m looking forward to our being church in this building and in this neighborhood. I’m looking forward to outgrowing this space and to discovering what comes next. My prayer for us today is that we will be faithful and bold in the mission to which we are called: to draw circles of inclusion large, open to all people regardless of who they are; to be open to be affected by each new person; to work for justice as a community and as individuals in this community, in this nation, and in this world; to embrace the vocation of peacemakers in the ideal of shalom; and to be about the task of growing community in the Spirit.

The Crossroads’ experience began years ago when the dream was born and the journey of being church together was begun. Some have called these seven years a wilderness wandering. The wandering has taken us through many locations, particularly the Dream Center, Wornall Road Baptist, and St. Mark’s Lutheran. With each move, this body has made choices to follow Christ. With each move, we have found more of our collective voice amid many competing voices so that now we say clearly that we exist to be inclusive, to stand for justice, to embrace the vocation of peacemaker, and to struggle to embrace the freedom of faith and the discipline of being community.

On the journey to 7917 Main, this congregation has been encountered by the Holy many times. On the journey, we have worked to find our collective will: to agree on direction, raise money, find a building, agree on a building, actually buy a building, and make the transition to this building. Being here today, each of us participates in the experience of the whole community, even if we were not present for each event. Today, in this building our new church house is a thin place where we encounter the numinous. The opportunity is here for us to embrace more depth in our lives.

The journey of faith is an ever-deepening cycle of experiencing the Holy, then adjusting to that experience. We reorient our lives as a result of that experience just in time to be encountered once again by the Holy, taking us ever deeper. This is life in the Spirit. This is the Christian life. This is what it means to be church.