

**Love Comes Down**  
**Mark 9:2-9, Epiphany 7, Year B**  
**19 February 2012**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

As some of you will remember, right out of college I worked in the admissions office for Hendrix College, my beloved *alma mater*. Twenty-two years old, with a newly-minted Bachelor of Arts, I was a proud advocate for liberal arts education in a new J. Crew suit and power tie with a Half-Windsor knot. Frankly, I was a little full of myself. One autumn afternoon, I drove into the Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas for a college fair at Fayetteville High School. I set up my table and neatly arranged my brochures. Soon, a young man with greasy hair and a black rock concert t-shirt stopped by and asked, “Y’all got comic book drawing at your college? I want to draw for Marvel Comics.”

“Well,” I offered, entering the admissions marketing zone, “Hendrix has a superb art department. And, you could earn a double-major in business in case you ever want to move into management.”

The young man looked at me as if I were an alien from another planet. “Just want to draw comics,” he said again. “Y’all got that?”

Suddenly, an idea sprang to my mind, a *hook*. I had him. “Well, no,” I carried on, “but a liberal arts degree is much more well-rounded. If all you do is learn to draw comic books, and Marvel Comics goes out of business, what will you do then?”

The kid cocked his head and with a smirk I’ll never forget responded, “I guess I’ll stand behind a table and hand out college pamphlets.”

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Believe it or not, that was not my worst experience that day. In those days, Interstate 540 hadn’t yet been built, and the state highway down the mountain from Fayetteville was twisting, narrow and treacherous, with one side hugging the mountain and the other dropping off into abyss. By the time the college fair ended and I headed toward home, dusk had settled, and with it came a thick fog. (The Ozarks are like the Blue Ridge in that way.) At the top of the mountain, everything was clear and starry sky, but I could see, just a few hundred yards below, that the world was swallowed in dense and soupy darkness.

I began my descent, and before my arms ached and my neck was stiff with tension. I was scared. And then, as if from nowhere, I came upon the taillights of an eighteen-wheeler piercing through the fog. *Light shining out of darkness*. They might as well have been Jesus himself beckoning me to follow, and follow I did. The trucker had clearly run this mountain

innumerable times before, in all weather conditions. He knew each turn intuitively, and no cloud was going to prevent his progress. I kept my eyes trained on those lights through fog, and eventually they led me down the mountain and into the valley.

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This past week we celebrated that feast of the church most embraced by our culture, the Feast of St. Valentine. As I stood in K-Mart last Monday afternoon, looking at aisles of syrupy pre-packaged greeting cards and cellophane-wrapped, heart-shaped boxes of candy, I paused to consider exactly what it is Valentine's Day celebrates.

The answer is simple and comes quickly. The notable thing about Valentine's Day is its brazen exaltation of love: *romantic* love, *intoxicating* love, *mountaintop* love. And the reason Valentine's Day is so commercially successful is that such love is not restricted to any niche market. We all crave it. Junior high students and octogenarians are equally vulnerable to cupid, as are people of any gender, ethnicity or orientation. "I *love* her," we say with stars in our eyes, and we mean exactly the stuff of Hallmark cards.

And, it is an idea that is absolutely, completely, and entirely absent in Holy Scripture. The kind of love extolled by Valentine's Day is so foreign to the heart of Christian faith that the Roman Catholic Church ended its observance of the Feast of St. Valentine more than forty years ago. Surely, scripture knows love. St. Paul affirms love as the greatest spiritual gift, the one without which no other gift has meaning. St. John tells us not that God is power nor that God is justice, but that God *is love*. But that love is different in kind from Valentine's Day; it is virtually the opposite of the cellophane love sold at K-Mart.

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Today's Gospel passage comes exactly in the middle of Mark. It is the hinge of Mark's story, the spine of his book. It is the Transfiguration, and everything else Mark tells us is oriented to it. The first eight chapters of Mark lead up to it, and the latter eight chapters follow from it. Consequently, this brief passage is key to our understanding of who Jesus is and who we are called to be. This story also gives us the true definition of love, and we are fortunate it appears on our calendar immediately after the alternative definition offered to us by Valentine's Day outside these walls.

Peter, James and John follow Jesus up the mountain, and once at the top Jesus is transformed in their eyes. They see him as he is, not the ragged and mud-splattered man who walks the roads of Galilee, but the Son of God, Incarnate Deity, the very completion of every promise God has ever made to humanity. And they are star-struck.

“I *love* him,” the disciples likely spontaneously say. It is, after all, *the* mountaintop experience! It is, on a cosmic scale, *the* Hallmark moment. Were the disciples Shakespeare, they’d compose sonnets. Were they Hershey they’d whip up boxes of candy.

The disciples say they want to stay atop the mountain, basking in their bedazzlement in the presence of this one they adore. But almost as soon as they’ve said so, clouds begin to descend. They are blinded by soupy fog, and when they begin to see, Jesus is ragged and mud-splattered again. He looks, well, ordinary.

Uh oh. We know that experience. It’s the day *after* Valentine’s Day, the day after the allure wears off, the day when the Hallmark card gets used as scratch paper for the grocery list. It’s the day when sickness befalls, or financial pressures crowd, or arguments outweigh sentiments of joy. It’s the day the clear and starry sky is swallowed by the clouds. This is where Valentine love proves to be no more substantial than cellophane. And, this is where, Jesus teaches us, real love begins.

You see, in his first act after revealing the fullness of his nature, Jesus walks down the mountain *into the fog*. For the rest of Mark’s Gospel he will march steadily toward Jerusalem, where he will receive the blows and taunts and pain of a confused and hurting people. He won’t walk away. He won’t quit. He won’t find excuses. And he surely won’t debase real and true love by staying safe above the clouds. He walks down the mountain, and the *next* time he ascends any hill he will have a heavy wooden cross on his back.

Starting today, Jesus shows Peter, James, and John—he shows *us*—what real love does, how real love acts, what real love looks like. And this is not only the love between lovers, but between parents and children, friends, and, it’s worth saying, fellow Christians. Fleming Rutledge says, “Love comes down...Love is grateful for the experience on the mountaintop, but knows that it cannot stay there. Love persists when glory has faded, when the romance has fled, when the curtain has been dropped on the stage set. Love never gives up.”

Many of us have been on the receiving end of cellophane love that abandons us when the clouds descend. We have been hurt by lovers and friends and the church.

Many of us also, ashamedly, have extended such pitiful, sorry love. We have loved on the mountaintop but failed to love in the valleys. We have given up and walked away and left those we professed to love lost in the fog and darkness.

And we have been Peter, James and John, misunderstanding that Jesus—that love—only first dazzles in order to provide the light we need to see us safely through the clouds and down the mountain.

Today, blessedly, we are reminded that, no matter who has failed us in this life and no matter when and how often *we* have failed, Jesus *does* walk down the mountain. Jesus *does* enter into the cloud and into the hurting heart. Jesus *does* provide light out of darkness, and if we cling to his light we can navigate the most twisting, narrow and treacherous roads. Just as importantly, pointing to his light we can truly love each other and make sure we all know the way.

The clouds will descend, people of God. They always do. They descend in our lives and they descend in our world. But don't fear. Jesus isn't staying on top of the mountain. His light is on the way down to where we are, into the depths of broken promises, loves lost, and sorrows deep. He travels to where love is most needed, and *his* love is solid and sure. Love comes down and meets us. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*