

The Power of the Beloved

Meditation on Mark 9:2-9

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Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

*2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, **but only Jesus.** ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

Martin Luther King, Jr., loved to sing! His mother, Alberta, was the organist and choir director of Ebenezer Baptist Church, in Atlanta where her husband, Martin's father, preached. The church was a short walk from their home at 501 Auburn Ave. Alberta would take him to sing in other churches beginning when he was very young, receiving praise for, "I Want to Be More and More Like Jesus." In 1939, he sang with his church choir at the Atlanta premiere of *Gone With the Wind*.

When he was little, Martin befriended a neighbor boy who was white. When they started school at 6 years old, Martin had to go to a school for African Americans; his friend went to a "whites-only" school. Martin lost

his friend soon afterward when the child's father no longer wanted the boys to play together.

Martin suffered from depression much of his life. He struggled with his faith. His father was a harsh man who whipped him regularly. When he was 13, he told his Sunday school teacher that he didn't believe in the bodily resurrection. After that, "doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly," he said. Years later, he would say that the Bible has "many profound truths which one cannot escape." Martin attended Morehouse College at 15, skipping 2 grades in high school. He earned a bachelor's in sociology in 1947 when he was 18. He decided to pursue the ministry to "answer an inner urge to serve humanity." He attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, PA. While there, he fell in love with the daughter of a German immigrant woman. His friends talked him out of marrying her, saying, "an interracial marriage would provoke animosity from both blacks and whites" and would damage "his chances of ever pastoring a church in the South." He broke off the relationship.

He married Coretta Scott on June 18, 1953, in Heiberger, Alabama. They had 4 children. At 25, he was called as pastor of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He pursued graduate studies in systematic theology at Boston University, earning a doctorate in 1955. In December of that year, the Rev. Dr. King would lead the Montgomery bus boycott after Rosa Parks, a young African American woman, refused to sit in the back of a city bus. The boycott lasts 385 days, ending when a U.S. District Court rules against segregation on all Montgomery public buses. Following the boycott came years of

speeches and traveling, organizing and participating in protests and marches, working for Civil Rights for African Americans, including the right to vote and attend school with whites. He was arrested and jailed 29 times and stabbed in the chest by a letter opener in 1958 when signing his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*.

His sermons criticized racial injustice and emphasized “man’s need for God’s love.” But more than his sermons, his speeches, filled with allusions to Scripture, will be long remembered. In his “I Have A Dream” speech, delivered in Washington, D.C., in 1963, he imagines a world where “justice is a reality for all God’s children.” “I have a dream that my four little children,” he says, “will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” This bears echoes of Hebrews 4:12, The Word of God “judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,” and 1st Samuel 16:7, “For man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord sees the heart.” Martin also quotes Amos 5:24, “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” He alludes to Isaiah 40:4-5, imagining a future when “every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

While the “I Have A Dream” speech is the most famous of his speeches, his “Mountaintop” speech has strong connections with the Transfiguration account in Mark. Martin has received a “mountaintop-like” vision that has strengthened him to trust in the Lord for whatever may come. He makes this speech in Memphis, TN, in 1968, the night

before his assassination.

“We've got some difficult days ahead,” Martin says to those gathered in the Mason Temple, headquarters of the Church of God in Christ. He has just told them about the bomb threat on his plane that delayed his flight. “But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...”

The disciples in our gospel today, have already seen Christ's miracles - the deaf can hear, the blind can see, the paralyzed begin walk. He casts out demons, feeds a hungry crowd with a couple of loaves and fish. Walks on water. Calms a storm. But still, his disciples don't understand who he is and why he has come. The divine encounter follows Peter declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, but then rebuking Jesus when he foretells his own death and resurrection. The point of the vision is not to strike terror in the disciples' hearts, though it does make them very afraid, but to reveal Christ's identity and power as God's Beloved Son.

Mountains are a biblical symbol for a holy place. Moses receives the 10 Commandments on a mountain. Elijah, in 1 Kings 19:17, in a time of

despair, goes back to the mountain, and after wind, earthquake and fire, he encounters God in “a sound of sheer silence.” On the mountain with Peter, James, and John, Jesus’ clothes become a “dazzling white,” as he speaks with Moses and Elijah, reminding us of the radiance of Moses’ face in Exodus 34:29-35, when he had been talking with God-- so bright that he has to cover it with a veil when he speaks to the Israelites.

Peter, frightened and confused, doesn’t know what to say--but neither do the others. He is the only one with the courage to speak. And when he does, he asks what he can do to serve the Lord, Moses and Elijah with his gifts and talents. He offers to build 3 “dwellings” or “tabernacles” -- holy places where each may be worshiped. That’s when the cloud overshadows them and things get even scarier.

Clouds are symbols of life and hope in semi-desert regions. The Lord appears in a pillar of cloud in Exodus, leading the Israelites through the desert. Now in Mark, a voice comes from the cloud telling the disciples that Christ is “God’s Son, *the Beloved*.” This reminds us of his baptism, when Jesus comes up out of the river, the “heavens are torn apart,” the Spirit descends “like a dove,” and a voice declares, “**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

But now the voice coming from the cloud commands the disciples to “**listen to him**.” Because they haven’t been listening, not in the full sense that it is meant. They haven’t believed what Jesus has said about what is to come. They haven’t always trusted him enough to do what he has said. Remember how Peter sinks in the water when he attempts to walk

to Jesus? Jesus scolds them frequently for having so little faith. They will need help, even after this divine vision on the mountaintop, to trust and obey. They will have it when the Power of the Beloved comes to them at Pentecost like a mighty, rushing wind, with tongues of fire.

We pray for the Power of the Beloved as we ordain and install deacons and elders today, charging them with the work of loving and serving the Lord by loving and serving people. Your leadership isn't like that of those elected to serve on boards of non-profits and businesses. Your job is to strive to be the greatest servant of all, imitating Christ. It's a big responsibility. People will look up to you as an example. It will be a humbling experience, sometimes a thankless job. You will pour your whole self into it, investing all your heart, and you will get tired sometimes. Listen for God's voice every day, study His Word, and pray you will learn to trust and obey the Lord.

You are not alone. Though you may still feel fearful and confused at times, like Peter, James and John on the mountaintop, The Power of the Beloved--our Savior-- will strengthen and guide you as you seek to walk in His ways. *Allow yourself to be transformed by Him.* You will also have the power of the Beloved--all of us--who will surround you with our love and prayers. We are in this together.

Don't try to make the church into a human institution. That's always a temptation. Don't measure its health or vitality with human measuring sticks, such as dollars in the bank. We are the Body of Christ; we belong

to Him. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., our work goes beyond the walls of a church building. We sow seeds; we work for peace, justice, equality and reconciliation in our world. We are the voice for the voiceless, stewards of the gospel of grace.

Martin Luther King, Jr., loved to sing. His last words before he was shot on his hotel balcony on April 4, 1968, were spoken to his musician, Ben Branch, scheduled to perform that night at an event King planned to attend. "Ben, make sure you play "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" in the meeting tonight," Martin said. "Play it pretty."

Let us pray.

God of the mountaintop, Lord of the valleys, sea and sky, we praise you and thank you for Your Son, The Beloved, who has taken our sins away with his death on a cross. Thank you for the new and abundant life you offer to all who trust in Him. Thank you for your power that lives in and among us and guides and strengthens us to do your will. Help us, Lord, to listen, really listen to you, and be all that you desire us to be as a church and as individuals. Forgive us for living each day, not always in faith, but in fear and trembling, like the 3 disciples on the mountaintop with Jesus. Lead us to be your servants, stewards of your gospel of grace, working to right wrongs in the community, country and world--correct injustices, fight bigotry, oppression and discrimination, labor for human rights, and speaking up as the voice for the voiceless. In Christ we pray. Amen.