

“Coming Down from the Mountain”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
February 19, 2012 – Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9: 2-10

“Epic. Amazing. Incredible. Super. The greatest event our city has ever seen.” These are just some of the descriptions which have been used to portray Indianapolis hosting Super Bowl XLVI. What happened over the course of those ten days in our city was special, indeed, and was the culmination of years of hard work by thousands of people.

I don’t think there is any doubt that we all felt a great deal of pride in how our city, region, and state hosted hundreds of thousands of guests. From big things like the Super Bowl Village or the huge picture of the Lombardi Trophy on the side of the JW Marriott Hotel, to the small things, like volunteers greeting visitors at the airport and downtown by saying, “Have a super day!” or wearing one of 8,000 hand-knitted scarves. All of these efforts were supported by attendance records for all events throughout the week, the majority of which were local residents who came to experience this once-in-a-lifetime festival.

I know the high-point for me was right before the game. When Kelly Clarkson stepped-up to sing the National Anthem, she was supported by 46 boys and girls from the Indianapolis Children’s Choir. Those 46 children represented over 600 children in all the choirs from across our city and region, including our own Erin Mansell and Maddie Andrews. And while he was not seen standing behind Ms. Clarkson, our own Ben McKinnon-Duggins was one of the choir members you heard, through the background track which was being played. To hear and see those children on such an international stage was the pinnacle for me, both as a parent and as a resident of this city.

The Super Bowl was a mountain-top experience for our city. We will be reliving this event in our communal lives for months and years to come. In fact, it’s already begun. This past Thursday, Channel 13 aired a one-hour, commercial-free recap of the entire week of events. I suspect there will be constant efforts to continually bring back everything that happened two weeks ago.

And yet, the calendar will never again read “February 5, 2012.” There is no way we can turn back time and live once again those glory days. It was definitely a mountain-top experience for us all; but our daily lives occur predominantly in the valleys and plains, not up on top of the mountain. At some point, we have to come down from the mountain.

Today we celebrate Jesus’ transfiguration, a moment in Jesus’ life which speaks not only to his identity and mission, but also to how we are called to follow God’s only Son. There are three events which make this mountain-top experience like no other.

First, Jesus himself “was transfigured before them,” his physical features change right before Peter and James and John. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” We know a little what it’s like for someone’s appearance to change: we notice a woman who is pregnant has a certain “glow” about her; or we can

tell in very bright sunlight how someone's clothes seem to shine in an unusual fashion. But what it was like for Jesus to be transfigured is truly unknown to us, for it was like nothing else seen before or ever again.

Second, two people appear out of nowhere standing beside Jesus: Moses and Elijah. We don't know what they said. At first, we're really not sure why these two men out of the Old Testament are selected to be with Jesus. But their presence is very symbolic in this instance. Moses represents the only other human who has seen God face-to-face. And Elijah was very important to the Jews, for he was believed to be the one who would usher in the Messiah, the King of the Jews. Besides these meanings, Moses and Elijah standing beside Jesus on the mountain-top represent the connection of the old with the new, the promise of a covenant people and the promise of the kingdom which is to come. One more time in their lives, Moses and Elijah were God's messengers to God's children.

Third, a cloud descends over the mountain, and a voice from heaven speaks to all who could hear. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." That should sound familiar. It is the same phrase said by God when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John. On that occasion, the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. This time, a cloud has covered him, bright and dense, so that he shone even brighter than before. And God declares again how this one, the babe who laid in a manger and now stands on the mountain-top, is beloved by God.

In these three events, Jesus is transformed in some way. In what way, we are not sure, we will never be sure. But in both a physical and symbolic way, something "godly" happens on that mountain-top to Jesus that sets him apart. It is a godly act, it is a God-initiated act, which shows the might and power and glory of God to humans such as Peter and James and John, and for that matter, all of us.

And yet, while God showed his might and power to humans on that mountain, this was not the end of Jesus' ministry on earth. He could not accomplish his mission by staying on top of that mountain with Peter, James, and John. They had to come down.

Seven years ago, my father preached here at John Knox, and in a sermon entitled "Mountaintops," he said the following:

A ski racer knows that a race is not won on the top of the mountain. The finish line is at the bottom, back in the valley. You can enjoy the view, you can get psyched up, you can receive encouragement from your coach at the top of the mountain. But you have to leave the top to compete in the race.

After the transfiguration, Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain and resumed their ministry of teaching and healing. On the way down Jesus ordered them not to talk about their experience on the mountaintop until after his resurrection. Telling the story of what happened on the mountain could easily become a substitute for doing the work God had called them to do. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters today seem to choose that road. They tell repeatedly the story of their conversion or the story of an inspiring personal experience of God's presence. Sharing the story of how we have experienced God with us can be reassuring and encouraging to others. But it can also become a substitute for Christian living and service. Jesus' command, "Tell no one . . .," reminds us that "to

show” is as significant, if not more significant, than “to tell.”

We all have mountaintop experiences in our life as Christians. For some it may be in a particular setting. For some the mountaintop may be a time of new direction in life – a turning away from selfish ambition, a turning toward God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. “Here I am, Lord.” “Take my life and let it be consecrated.” For some the mountaintop may be at the Lord’s Table or at the Baptismal Font. It may be on Christmas Eve or on Maundy Thursday or Easter Sunday. These mountaintop experiences may include call and confirmation, confession and celebration. We sense that as Jesus touched his frightened disciples, he touches us. We are renewed and motivated to discipleship. But we cannot pitch a tent and stay on the mountaintop. We must come down to punch the clock, to meet the deadline, to change the diapers, to prepare the meals, to do the shopping, to take the car to be serviced, to teach the class, to live with our family and our neighbors, to deal with our students, our customers, our clients, our teachers, our patients, our church members. That is where we serve Christ – off the mountaintop in the valley of daily life. And sometimes it’s in the valley that we have a mountaintop experience (W. F. Mansell, Jr., “Mountaintops,” February 6, 2005).

Two weeks from today, we will have a mountain-top experience as a congregation. On March 4, we will celebrate our 50th anniversary as a church. There will be special guests present that day, we will have special music to celebrate, and we will reflect on all that God has done through this congregation over the past half-century.

This day will be like other mountain-top experiences we have had as a congregation: other anniversary days, special worship occasions, and most recently, the dedication of our new sanctuary. These moments are full of emotion, excitement, and stay in our memories for quite some time.

But if we only live for those mountain-top spiritual experiences, we are being unfaithful to the one we meet on the mountain. If we only put our energy, effort, and dedication into the high-profile moments of our church’s life, then we are ignoring our Lord’s command to come down from the mountain and give, love, and serve as disciples. If all we wish to do is pitch our tents in pride and bask in the glories of the past, we will never realize the power which the mountain-top experience can truly have: to lead us into a future call of discipleship which truly glorifies God.

As a city, reliving the glories of hosting the Super Bowl will not solve the problems we face in education, homelessness, hunger, and unemployment. As a church, staying on the mountain-tops of big events will not fulfill the charge our Lord has given us to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the triune God, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

On a Sunday when we celebrate our transfigured Lord, may we remember that we do not walk down the mountain all alone, but with our Lord standing right by our side: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.