

SUCH AS NO ONE ON EARTH COULD BLEACH THEM
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on February 11, 2024

Text: Mark 9:2-10

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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

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. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

How many of you plan to watch the Super Bowl tonight? And how many of you are actually more interested in the commercials than the game itself? A few years ago there was a commercial for Tide laundry detergent that started out like a commercial for something else. But then the actor stopped and looked into the camera and said, No, this was actually a Tide commercial, and you could tell because his shirt was so extraordinarily clean. I don’t know if you remember that one, but I thought of it when I read the gospel reading today.

We’ve all heard this story many times before. Jesus goes mountain climbing one day and takes along a few of his disciples. When he gets to the top of the mountain, all of a sudden his clothes turn white. And not just an ordinary kind of white, but “a dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.”

That’s how the New Revised Standard Version puts it. Other translations are even more emphatic. The New English Translation says that Jesus’ clothes

became “radiantly white, more so than any launderer in the world could bleach them.” The New King James Version says they became “shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them.” And the Living Bible says they became “dazzling white, far more glorious than any earthly process could ever make it!”— exclamation point!

So we’re not talking about a subtle change here. Jesus’ clothes don’t just get a little bit whiter. They turn white like we’ve never seen before, white like we can’t imagine, white like not even Tide could make them. And my question is, Why? Why does the gospel go to such lengths to make it clear that this is a level of white that doesn’t exist on this planet, a level of white that’s literally out of this world?

Well, let’s start with the obvious: This is a weird story. And by that I mean it has a different feel to it than every other story in the gospel. And it’s not just because something incredible happens. Lots of

incredible things happen in the gospel. Jesus heals people and casts out demons. He feeds a crowd of five-thousand with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He calms a storm and walks on water. But the difference is, all those stories have a sense of location. They're all grounded in the world we know. They all happen in a specific town or a specific region—someplace we can point to on a map; someplace we could go visit if we wanted to.

But with the Transfiguration, all of a sudden we're not in Kansas anymore. And that's the point.

This is a story about Jesus taking a select few disciples away from the everyday world and leading them "up a high mountain apart, by themselves." And there the curtain is pulled back and a whole other reality is revealed to them—a reality that human beings normally can't perceive; a reality that's just beneath the surface of our routine lives. So of course it's going to seem a little weird. It's like when the microscope was invented, and people looked down through the eyepiece for the first time and saw all these strange little creatures swimming around. They were seeing a whole other reality that had always been there, right under their noses, but they never knew it.

The Transfiguration is that kind of moment. It's a moment when the disciples get a glimpse of a deeper reality that's always been there, right under their noses, but they never knew it. It's a moment when they see who Jesus really is and what his life and ministry are really about.

And that's where Moses and Elijah come in.

They're two of the most significant figures in Israel's history, two of Israel's most important prophets. And suddenly they're standing right next to Jesus, and the three of them are having a conversation, and Jesus is talking to them, not as a subordinate, but as an

equal, someone of the same status. And what that tells the disciples is, Jesus isn't just a healer, and he isn't just a preacher, which is how they've seen him up to this point. He's something more. He's a prophet. He's someone with a special connection to God. He's someone who speaks on God's behalf and carries out God's will.

And the disciples are completely awestruck. They don't know what to do. So Peter blurts out what has to be one of the dumbest ideas ever. He says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." What's he going to do, run down the mountain, go to a Home Depot, and come back with a bunch of plywood and nails? On a practical level, it doesn't make any sense. It's ridiculous. But on an emotional level, I get where he's coming from.

He's trying to get a handle on this very weird experience by hooking it into something familiar. The three dwellings is a reference to one of the big Jewish festivals—the festival of booths—where people would build these little temporary structures.

So he's trying to squeeze this moment into his traditional Jewish faith. But he barely finishes his sentence before a cloud overshadows the mountain, and a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" In other words, No, Peter, don't try to bring this moment down to your level of understanding. Don't try to put it in a box. You have to let it open your minds. You have to let it expand your perception. Jesus is not just a healer. And he's not just a preacher. And he's not even just a prophet. He's more than any of these labels you want to put on him. He's my Son. He's my Beloved. My relationship with him is deeper than any concept you have. So listen to him. Let him show you a life that's more than you ever imagined.

Now, the disciples don't understand what all of that means anymore than people understood what they were looking at when they first looked through a microscope. They'll spend the rest of the gospel, and the rest of their lives, trying to figure it out. But already they've taken a big step. Already they've begun to see that there's more to reality than what they've experienced all their lives. Already they've begun to see that the way things are is not the way things have to be. Already they've begun to see that there's so much more.

That's the beginning of wonder. And wonder is the beginning of possibility. And possibility is the beginning of hope. And hope is the beginning of change. And change is what Jesus' life and ministry are about. Change is what he came to proclaim: The kingdom of God has come near. A whole other reality is right under your noses. Amen.