Reality show: Mark 9:2-9

Do not look for this mountain on a Bible map. It juts out not from the topography of Galilee, but from the topography of God.

by Thomas G. Long in the March 7, 2006 issue

Not far from where I live is a geological oddity. Stone Mountain is a bald and rounded mass of granite a mile and a half long and nearly a thousand feet high. Eons ago, molten rock pushed up from the earth's core to the surface, then bubbled out and hardened into a monolith. Given the flat landscape around it, what one notices first about Stone Mountain is how unexpected it is. This isolated mass of stone stands all alone, sticking out like a blister on a thumb. It is as if an unneeded chunk of the Rockies was carelessly tossed over the shoulder of the Creator and landed improbably in a Georgia pasture.

So it is with the Markan account of Jesus' transfiguration on a high mountain. Nothing in the immediate topography of Mark prepares us for it. Earlier, Jesus went up a mountain to call his disciples, and he ascended a mountain to pray, but after that the landscape of Mark flattens out. Jesus has been doing ministry in the lowlands of rural Galilee, with no mountain in sight. Suddenly and without warning, the grade in Mark's narrative turns sharply upward, and we find ourselves with Peter, James and John on a "high mountain apart." So abrupt and unexpected is this change of landscape, geographically and spiritually, that some scholars have suggested that the transfiguration story is actually a postresurrection story.

But this misses the point. The transfiguration story is not a wandering Easter account that makes a clumsy entrance into the middle of Mark's Gospel. Rather, it is a summons to look at what is happening around us from a different angle of vision. The fact that we suddenly encounter a high mountain where we least expect one is crucial. Put simply, this abrupt appearance of a soaring mountain is an invitation to scale its heights with Peter, James and John so that we too can see what we cannot see in the valley. Do not look for this mountain on a Bible map. This mountain juts

out not from the topography of Galilee, but from the topography of God. This is the mountain of revelation, the mountain of transformed vision, the mountain of true seeing.

What we see first, of course, is Jesus. Yes, we also see dazzling clothes, the cloud of divine protection, Elijah and Moses. We hear, “This is my Son, the beloved.” But as Morna Hooker has commented, the transfiguration account can best be understood as a “christophany,” a moment when we see “who Jesus Christ really is.” What gets transfigured is not Jesus but our perception of him. Our vision changes; we see Jesus for real.

One of the things we see is that Jesus is beloved by God. We could never have seen that down in the valley, never have guessed that he is beloved by anybody. Already he has been misunderstood by his disciples, rejected by his hometown, drained of his power by his neighbors’ scoffing unbelief and plotted against by the authorities. Even more powerful winds of hell are about to be unleashed. Jesus knows that he “must undergo great suffering and be rejected.” Jesus beloved? Hardly.

But if we see Jesus for real on that mountain, we see ourselves for real too. The Markan community would surely have recognized the parallels between themselves and Jesus. If Jesus’ ministry experienced rejection, failure and violence, so did theirs. Down in their own valley, all they could see was their life and hope slipping away. But up on that mountain they could see themselves in Jesus’ light. They could see their own baptismal garments dazzling like the sun, see the cloud of God’s care hovering over them, hear God calling them “beloved.” Once again they could trust the promise that “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

And so it is for us. Sometimes nothing is more discouraging than ministry in the messy middle of things. Trying to speak a word for peace in a war-mad world. Trying to promise hope to a culture that mistrusts what it cannot grasp, that takes no checks, only cold cash. Down in the valley, it is often hard to see how ministry in Jesus’ name can be sustained.

In his memoir *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, lay Episcopal minister Garret Keizer describes a Holy Saturday vigil held in his tiny Vermont parish. When Keizer arrived at the church, he found that only two other people, a husband and wife, had come for the service. As the three of them huddled together in the old church, Keizer lit

the Paschal candle and extinguished the other lights, a symbol of hearing God's great promise of hope "in darkness, longing to hear it in the light of day."

Together they prayed: "Grant that in this Paschal feast we may so burn with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may attain to the festival of everlasting light."

The Paschal candle sputtered in the dimness. As they prayed, the worshipers could hear cars passing by outside, travelers in a secular age oblivious to the ancient hopes being spoken in the little chapel. "There we are," Keizer wrote, "three people and a flickering light." This act of worship was, he said, "so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools."

That says it well. Either the Lord is with us or we are pathetic fools. Down in the valley, with our faith buffeted by storms of disregard, doubt and disdain, our eyes can tell us only one thing: we are pathetic fools.

But up on the mountain there is another angle of vision. Up there, in the light of Christ, we can see for real.