

“The One Above All”  
Sermon by Ann Hamel  
John Knox Presbyterian Church  
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**Mark 9: 2-9**

It has been Almost a year since we practically shut down everything on a moments notice for an unseen enemy, the coronavirus. And what a challenging year it has been. There has been so much talk on numbers of cases, surges, hospitalizations, death, loss of jobs, damage to small business, concern for the economy. And to add to all of that there have been multiple protest on racial injustice, riots and looting, tearing down statues with injury and death to some people. Then to top it all off a presidential election with all its concerns, controversies and chaos.

Wow, as I look at this, I would say what else could trigger more fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety related to all kinds of losses, to illness, to death, to those in power, to threats to one's values and personal freedoms and possibly much more for some people and less for others depending on the person's circumstances, experience and perspective. It can be very overwhelming. And yet, in all of this, each of us has a story. A story of what we have experienced, how we have felt, what we have seen and how we have responded. In my thinking, people would like to share their stories, to explain their perspective and responses but who will listen. And again, there may be a fear of saying anything because one might offend someone, be labeled, called names. Social media seems to have a way of doing that. So, who does one trust and where is God in all this?

But before we go on with this story, let's do something different. Since the gospel of Mark according to some scholars was written sometime between 60-70AD, in Rome, to encourage and to remind Christians of the foundation of their faith, during a time of hardship and persecution, let's use our imagination and go back to that time and join a group of people who are listening, some maybe for the first time, to the words we have just heard from Mark's gospel. Again, It is somewhere around 60-70 AD and we are gathered as people who are followers of Jesus Christ. The city is Rome during the time of the emperor Nero. It is a time of civil unrest. There have been accusations made that Nero had ordered the burning of Rome to put into place his desires for urban renewal. Nero to deflect these accusations has placed the blame of the cities burning onto those who are called Christians.

We as Christians, as part of this group we have just joined have now been accused of burning Rome and not only that but have also been accused of hating the human race and the consequences are dire. We face death by

burning in Nero's gardens or being torn apart by wild animals in Nero's circus. We have been falsely accused. We have been labeled as a possible subversive group. The future is uncertain. Will we be arrested for confessing our faith? Will we be betrayed by a family member or a member of our group so they may save themselves? Our leaders are dying for their faith, Peter by crucifixion. We sense our own fear and anxiety as well as the fear and anxiety of those around us. Who do we trust? Where do we turn? Where is God in all this?

And then, as we are seated in a room lit only by torches and lanterns, we hear the spoken word of the gospel and we are reminded of who Jesus is. The one speaking is telling the story of how Jesus, whom Peter Identified as the Messiah, led Peter, James and John to a high mountain, and there in front of their eyes he was transfigured and his cloths turned whiter than anything they had ever seen. And then Moses and Elijah were there with him, talking to him, and then Peter, impetuous Peter, just blurted out something that really did not make a whole lot of sense because they were so frightened. We kind of smile to ourselves because we have known and loved Peter and that is just Peter. Our attention is brought back as the speaker then tells of a cloud that covered everything and from that cloud a voice spoke and said "this is my son, the beloved, listen to him". And suddenly, as Peter, James and John looked around they saw no one with them, but only Jesus.

As the speaker's voice fades out, we are quiet and in reflection recall that just before this mountain experience, Jesus had spoken of his suffering, death and of rising again in three days; and we know this is true for Peter was an eyewitness to Jesus's life, to his unjust condemnation and his death. He experienced the presence of Jesus multiple time after he had risen from the dead. We have heard this from Peter. And here again, we have heard that Moses and Elijah were with him on this mountain top. They are living. These two have represented the law and the prophet for centuries; but here in this story Jesus is the one who is transfigured and shines in all his glory; and He is affirmed as the Son of God. Jesus is the one shone to be above all. He is the one who fulfills it all.

We feel a sense of peace affirmed in our faith that Jesus is the Son of God. He is living. He is with us, and there is life beyond what we experience here, beyond death. And now we have a decision to make. How will we deal with the fear and anxiety we feel as we go forward and out from this place? Will we stand firm in our faith, falter, or fade away?

Some really deep questions under those circumstances. But let's come back now to our own time. That was really some trip. Wasn't it?

However, is not the question of how will we deal with fear and anxiety as we go forward also a question that we may all deal with at times in some form or

other. I would say that in all the issues of this past year, I mentioned earlier, it is a question that many people have asked of themselves or others.

In our journey of faith we may at times experience a deeper sense of God's presence, an awesome moment, not like what Peter, James and John experienced but a moment which has touched our hearts deeply, and then, there are times where we may also experience the valleys, the hard and tough times, of which fear and anxiety are a part, where we may experience some doubt and/or question where is God,

In my journey, one of my awesome moments in the midst of fear and anxiety was when I was facing surgery for removal of a tumor from my Parotid gland which was located near my facial nerve. I was not only fearful of anesthesia and all its what if possible complications, but also, of a possible partial paralysis of my face if the facial nerve was injured and what that would be like. In the hospital, as I was waiting to go back to the surgery suite, pastor Frank offered a prayer and I was deeply touched by the name of Jesus which he repeated three times. And with the name of Jesus being said, I have no words for the peace that I felt. My anxiety and fear were gone.

And yes, there have been times that have been tough, where there has been fear and anxiety, where questions have surfaced such as is all this I believe true; and I have gone back to the story of those we call martyrs, the people who walked with Jesus, were closest to Jesus, people who died confessing their faith. And answered my question with another question "Why would they do that if it were not true?"

In the midst of this pandemic and all the other issues, as I experienced some fear and anxiety related to the virus as well as a weariness of it all, I turned to the Psalms and other parts of scripture. From Psalm 56, I heard these words "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust and am not afraid" and from Isaiah chapter 40: "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint". These words and many others gave me a sense of peace knowing that our Lord is God and we can trust in Him.

Many have been affected more deeply than I during this past year and my heart goes out to them, to all those who have suffered losses of people they love, of losses of any kind in which they have dealt with fear and anxiety. The Lord is with you- He, heals the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds—(Psalm 147)

To all those who would like to share their stories, who feel fearful in doing so, our Lord is with you. He will always listen. He has said he will never leave us or forsake us.

Where is God in all this? In contemplating this question and after the virus just did not disappear and despite all the other issues, I began to look at it from a different perspective, a changed perspective and saw God working through his people through the gifts and talent given to them, in those who worked with science and research learning about the virus and developing the vaccine in record time, in those who cared for others in the medical field or at home, in those who continued to provide education for children and young adults, in those who provided resources of food and finances for the good of others, and in those who have helped here at the church and so much more. Our Lord has been and is walking with us through it all giving courage, strength, help, comfort, healing through and with His people as He has through all ages. This is awesome. And for this I give thanks.

In closing, I would like to share some words from a song I heard over the holidays and to which I have listened to off and on since. The words are from a song by Casting Crowns featuring Matt Maher called Make Room.

“A family hiding from the storm, found no place at the keeper’s door. It was for this a child was born, to save a world so cold and hollow. A sleeping town they did not know, that lying in a manger low, a savior king who had no home, has come to heal our sorrows. Shepherds counting sheep at night, do not fear the glory light, you are precious in His sight, God has come to raise the lowly, A mother holds the promise tight, every wrong will be made right, the road is straight the burden’s light, for in His hands he holds tomorrow. Is there room in your heart, is there room in your heart for God to write His story? You can come as you are, it may set you apart, when you make room in your heart and trade your dreams for His glory. Make room in your heart.”

In life’s journey, God may speak to us in so many different ways through scripture, other people, through nature, through music and many more. The question is will there be room in our hearts for God to write His story? Or in other words will there be room in our hearts that we may hear and obey the voice that spoke to Peter, James and John that said “This is my son, the beloved, Listen to him”

Let us pray: Holy Lord God, your glory shines in the darkness and through all ages. You alone are above all. Your story is awesome. Your love is everlasting. In you is our hope. In you we place our trust and find a peace that passes all understanding. Thank you for being with us in life’s journey in blessings and sorrows unto life everlasting. Amen.