

After several weeks in Mark chapter one, today we are fast forwarding to chapter nine.

We are missing a lot, which is ironically appropriate, because Jesus' disciples are too.

Skipping ahead in Mark's story, it is hard for us to realize how hard it is for the disciples to realize exactly who Jesus is.

We've heard chapter one open with a clear introduction: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

We've heard the story of his baptism, much like today's story, with a voice from a cloud saying to Jesus, *You are my Son, the Beloved.*

We've heard a demon shout at him: *I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*

But demons are smarter than disciples, who weren't yet there at the beginning or at the baptism.

They watch him work wonders and listen to him teach with authority, but they do not see who he really is.

When Jesus stills a storm on the lake in the bowels of night, the disciples ask, *Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?*

In the very next story, the question is answered by a shrieking demon: *What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*

Unlike the disciples, the demon then drowns.

Unlike the disciples, the demon knows who Jesus is.

More stories and situations unfold, more miracles and conversations and clues.

The disciples keep following, keep wondering.

Finally, six days before the story we receive today, Jesus sits them down and looks them in the eye and asks whether they have a name for the elephant in the room.

He leads them, as one who teaches with authority, from the general to the personal, from the surface to the soul.

*Who do people say that I am?*

All the hands go up; lots of answers, theories, speculations.

*But who do you say that I am?*

Silence--holy, scary, stifling silence.

Naturally it's Peter who says something.

*You are the Messiah.*

And Jesus tells them not to tell anyone, and that he, the Messiah, must suffer and die, which Peter doesn't like, so they fight, and then, *six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.*

Gifted perceiver and poet Madeleine L'Engle marvels at what happens next:

*Suddenly they saw him the way he was,  
the way he really was all the time,  
although they had never seen it before,*

*the glory which blinds the everyday eye and so becomes invisible.*  
*This is how he was, radiant, brilliant,*  
*carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands.*  
*This is the way he was -- is -- from the beginning,*  
*and we cannot bear it.*  
*So he manned himself, came manifest to us;*  
*and there on the mountain they saw him, really saw him, saw his light.*  
(from The Irrational Season)

After so many healings and hints, after so many questions and quizzical looks, after so many chapters and verses and episodes and encounters and missteps and miracles, and after that sacred moment when Peter saw it but couldn't see it, when he spoke with both the insight and the danger of a demon; after six days of awkward silence and picking out and pulling aside his three closest friends and climbing with them all the way to the top of a remote, steep mountain, finally, now...

Jesus comes out to his friends.

For the first time, they realize who he really is.

Maybe you can remember such a moment in your life, a thin slice of time that changed your life forever.

A moment when you were vulnerable and transparent and dazzlingly honest.

A moment when you came out to your friends, a moment when you stood naked before someone you dared to trust, so perilously naked emotionally or physically or both.

A moment when you shared a secret, when you showed all your cards, when you took not just anyone to a place far enough away from normal to be, if only for a blinding and terrifying moment, who you really are.

Or a moment when someone chose and took and trusted you with their own transfiguration, shining with the sudden, paralyzing beauty of God only hinted at, kept hidden inside them from the rest of the world because it is too heavy and fragile and precious for the stumbling world to bear.

A moment so sacred and beautiful and true it scared you speechless and left you to wonder with an exquisite sadness why you could not stay there forever.

We are about to experience such a moment.

Matilda Lucretia Waldron is about to be revealed for who she really is.

The faces of her parents and sponsors and family and friends will glow, reflecting the light of God ablaze inside of her.

As we wonder about her future and speculate about her destiny, the Voice will tell us who she really is.

*This is my daughter, the Beloved.*

Matilda is the child of the Most High God.

I hope someday, many chapters and stories and hints and misunderstandings and miracles from now, Matilda will trust someone enough to lead them apart and show them who and how beautiful she really is, that she will let her light shine full force before others who will see and give glory to her Father in heaven.

I hope this, of course, for all of God's children: for her brother Keller and for each of you and for me and for all those who slog through the valleys of the world, fighting with demons and with dear friends, scratching for food and safety against a hunger for the kind of trust and truth that is too heavy and holy for us to bear.

*This is how he was, radiant, brilliant,  
carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands.  
This is the way he was -- is -- from the beginning,  
and we cannot bear it.  
So he manned himself, came manifest to us.*

*Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, only Jesus.*

With Matilda's wet forehead still glistening with promise, her face still glowing with the glory of God, we will suddenly ruin the moment by tracing on her beautiful face the ugly cross of Christ.

Sunday morning's baptismal oil turns quickly to Wednesday's dirty ash.

Why must it be this way?

Only Jesus.

He loves the enemies on the ground too much to remain with his friends on the mountain.

He loves the pathetic, pretentious world too much to stay in God's heaven, much less his buddy's booth.

He loves the confused and cruel crowds to linger in the comfort and clarity of the cloud.

He will dim his light even to utter darkness until he can share that light, in all its fullness, with all who cannot bear it yet, until he can bear them all: Peter and James and John, and Matilda and you and me, and the two who are with him... no, not Moses and Elijah, but the two dying criminals on the crosses next to his.

He asks us to follow: not just up the mountain, but down it.

Children of God, *keep listening to him.*

He will lead you where you most dream and most dread to go.

He will lead you to the cross.

He will lead you to your self.

And he will lead you beyond both to a beauty such as no one on earth could bleach or bear or describe, the haunting and healing beauty of Only Jesus.

Madeleine L'Engle concludes:

*We all know that if we really see him we die.*

*But isn't that what is required of us?*

*Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.*

That life is worth the death.

That view is worth the climb.