

GOOD TO BE HERE
(Mark 9:2-9)

How many of you woke up this morning and said, "It's Transfiguration Sunday. We'd better get to church early to beat the crowd."? How many of you even knew it was Transfiguration Sunday before you got here?

Transfiguration Sunday is always the last Sunday after Epiphany and before Ash Wednesday. It's kind of an in-between Sunday, the bridge between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. And even though it comes around every single year and I know it's coming, I'm never quite sure what to do with it. Transfiguration is simply outside the range of my experience. What do you do with something that extraordinary?

I've had some amazing mountaintop experiences. I remember the first time we went to Acadia National Park. I got up really early one cold morning, bundled up, grabbed my camera and tripod and set off to see the sunrise from the top of Cadillac Mountain. Have any of you done that? Cadillac Mountain isn't much of a mountain, but it's supposed to be the first place in the United States where you can see the sunrise. Seeing that sunrise takes some effort, but it's worth it. Watching the sky erupt with color, purple and orange, changing every second until the sun clears the horizon – it takes your breath away.

That was back in the days before digital and I shot two rolls of film in less than half an hour. Even the best photo, though, couldn't begin to do justice to the real thing. My morning on Cadillac Mountain was a mountaintop experience at its best. And as I headed back down, I had pretty much the same thought as Peter: "It is good to be here!" I was chilled to the bone, but I wouldn't have missed it.

Glorious as that sunrise on Cadillac Mountain was, it didn't come close to what Peter and James and John experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration. I got a peek at God's glory in a sunrise. They saw God's glory full on in the face of Jesus. It's no wonder Peter said it was good for them to be there.

It was so good, in fact, that he wanted to stay – build some huts and settle down right there. That's one feeling I didn't share. I'd seen what I came to see, it was over, and there wasn't any reason to hang around. I was ready to go back down and get some breakfast and a cup of tea.

Here's the point: There are some experiences that are worth it. We'll make a special effort, we'll put up with a little inconvenience, we'll tolerate a little discomfort. What's worth it? is an individual thing, of course. Nancy wasn't about to crawl out of a nice warm bed to go stand on a cold, windy mountaintop just to see a sunrise. But when she flies to Illinois to see Jarryd she doesn't mind setting the alarm for 3:30.

Some things are worth it. It's good for us to be there for some things. We want to be there. We need to be there – and we will do whatever it takes to make sure we are there.

Consider two words: *worth* and *worship*. They sound a lot alike, and that's because they come from the same Old English root word. To worship something means to ascribe worth to it, to acknowledge its value, to recognize its merit in some special way. Obviously, a lot of things have worth and value and merit but that doesn't mean we worship them. A car has worth, for instance, but if we're more than 20 years old we probably don't worship our car.

When we worship something we recognize its transcendent value, its value beyond itself, beyond its price tag. At least that's the idea.

When we think of worship we ordinarily think God. Granted, there are lots of other things out there that we worship – small *g* gods that clamor for our attention and energy and devotion. But that's not where I'm going this morning. We'll put idolatry on the back burner and save it for another time.

A few weeks ago I mentioned a Gallup poll that asked people why they go to church. You may remember that respondents gave all sorts of answers, and "to worship God" was high on the list. It seems to me, though, that Peter's reaction to the Transfiguration pretty well sums them all up: "It's good for us to be here." What makes it good is probably going to be different for each worshipper, but in some way, for whatever reason, it's good to be there.

We don't need a poll to tell us one simple thing about church attendance. All we have to do is look around to know that a lot of people don't think it's good to be here – or in any church. There's a disconnect between what people tell the pollsters and what they actually do. They overwhelmingly say they identify with a church, but in fact the majority of Americans are unchurched. Church just doesn't make any meaningful difference in their lives.

There are all sorts of factors that contribute to this: busy schedules, competing activities, a society that's more and more secularized. But the underlying reason is simply motivation, or rather lack of motivation with respect to church.

Fifty years ago people went to church because it was the thing to do. Or maybe because there wasn't anything else to do. The stores were closed. There wasn't a youth league for every sport. And the churches were full. Today the stores are full, the sports fields are buzzing, and the churches are empty.

This isn't a plea to return to the good old days. Much as we might lament the changes, there's no going back. That's just not going to happen. So we might as well get used to the new reality and learn to live with it.

Which doesn't mean we just make like Achilles and sulk in our tent. No, no, no. Instead, our challenge is, first, to get a clear picture of the new reality that we're living in, and then to adapt to that reality.

That, in twenty-five words or less, is the point of the New Beginnings program and the message some of us heard in Framingham a week ago. Things have changed and if we're going to be faithful, we have to change, too.

What is our mission in light of the new reality that we're living in? All we know for sure is that it's definitely not the same as it was 185 years ago. It's not the same as it was 50 years ago. It's probably not the same as it was 20 years ago or even 10 years ago.

Not long after West Parish Church was founded, James Russell Lowell wrote an anti-slavery poem, parts of which became the hymn *Once to Every Man and Nation*. The last verse of the poem, which is also in the hymn declares, "New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth." That's every bit as true for the church as it is for a nation, especially for a church that believes God is still speaking.

So our challenge is to be the kind of church that will motivate people who are motivated to do 101 other things besides getting involved in a church. Our challenge is to be the kind of church that makes people want to be here, that makes them say, "It's good to be here." Motivation is something we need to be aware of and concerned about. Motivation is something we need to take into account in every aspect, every dimension of church life.

We can't promise anyone the kind of experience Peter and James and John had on that mountaintop. But we should aim for the kind of experience that will have people saying, "It is good to be here," because they've experienced something of God.