

**SERMON TITLE:** "Seeing Jesus"

**TEXT:** Mark 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

**BY:** Ryan Dueck

**DATE:** February 19, 2012/Transfiguration Sunday

---

One day not too long ago, Eric Weiner, the bestselling author of a book called *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Place on Earth*, found himself flat on his back in a hospital room in agonizing pain and without a clue what was causing it. Being a bit of a pessimist, his mind instantly raced to the worst-case scenario: cancer.

Whatever it was, he was sure it was something awful—a suspicion that was confirmed when the nurse who was there to draw blood leaned over and said these words: "Have you found your God yet?"

Well, Mr. Weiner survived—it turns out that it was nothing more than a severe and prolonged case of gas!—but the question he had been asked when he thought the end was near continued to haunt him.

### **Have you found *your* God yet.**

Mr. Weiner had always been something of an agnostic. He didn't rule out the possibility that God or gods might exist, but he was not raised in a religious household, and figured that there was just no way to know about matters of faith.

He was always interested in spiritual matters, mind you, just not very optimistic that there were answers to his questions. In fact, he coined a new phrase for himself: "Confusionist"

We're not even clear exactly what it is we're not clear about. We Confusionists throw our arms skyward and shout: *We have absolutely no idea what our religious views are. We're not even sure we have any, but we're open to the unexpected, and believe—no, hope—there is more to life than meets the eye.* Beyond that we are simply and utterly confused.

So what does a "confusionist" author do when presented with a crisis that highlights his own mortality? He writes a book, of course!

In *Man Seeks God*, Weiner travels around the world "test-driving" some of the more prominent world religions. He spends some time with Sufi mystics in Turkey, then it's off to Kathmandu for Buddhism, to New York to visit some Franciscan monks... and on and on it goes. Shamanism, Wicca, Taoism, Jewish mysticism. No religious stone goes unturned in Weiner's question to heed the nurse's warning—to find "his God."

Each chapter even begins with a clever little “advertisement” highlighting the specifics of what Weiner is looking for in his God, and plays off of traditional formats for personal ads. Here are a few examples:

Buddhism: Confusionist White Male (CWM) craves sanity and peace of mind. Looking for a levelheaded partner and noble truth teller who has been here before. Please enlighten me.

Christianity: CWM feeling empty inside. Looking for a deity closer to home. Are you the giving type?

CWM, looking to put a little magic in my life. Perhaps I need more than one deity to meet my needs. Open to a multiple-god relationship. Let's get creative together.

There are other examples, but this provides a snapshot. It's an interesting approach to matters of faith and God, isn't it?

It's clear who is in the drivers seat, isn't it? The seeker is in charge. The seeker determines what kind of God will be acceptable and what will not. The seeker decides what elements of this or that religion will be considered and which will not.

University of Lethbridge sociologist Reg Bibby coined a phrase for this approach a few years back: “religion à la carte.” We approach the smorgasbord of religious options presented to us, and we take what we like. A little bit of this from Christianity, a little bit of that from Buddhism, perhaps a side of humanism, and maybe a few elements of Islam or Hinduism for dessert.

It is consumer religion at it's finest. The consumer is sovereign, and the consumers needs/desires are the only ones that matters.

The nurse's question was an accurate reflection of our culture in more ways than she probably even realized. Have **YOU** found **YOUR** God yet?

For modern human beings, the emphasis is very often on “me.”

---

I'm not finished the book yet, so I don't know where Mr. Weiner will end up on his quest to find his God. But it was very interesting for me to read his book alongside of our texts for this week.

As we have already heard, today is Transfiguration Sunday and our focus is on Jesus' miraculous appearance to Peter, James, and John on the mountain.

It is a holy moment.

This past weekend at our church retreat, Dan Graber led us through a Saturday night session focused on “wonder” and “awe” and how being open to and grateful for these experiences is one of the ways in which we are “re-created” as human beings.

We shared photos and stories about times in our life when we sensed God’s presence in unique way, or felt particularly close to God.

Eric Weiner refers to these moments as “thin places”: “those rare locales where the distance between heaven and earth is compressed and you can sense the divine” (p. 66).

I imagine that for Peter, James, and John, this would have been one of these “thin places”—these moments of wonder and awe where we get a glimpse behind the ordinary and the mundane and we experience the beauty and goodness and truth that surrounds and upholds our world and us.

Not only is Jesus’ appearance transformed into one of brilliant whiteness, but they see Elijah and Moses—these heroes of the Jewish faith—right there beside him! And then, as if their senses weren’t already overloaded, God himself speaks, declaring that this Jewish rabbi that they had been wandering around Palestine with was *divine*—the Son of God himself!

The moment is rich with biblical symbolism. Many scholars are of the opinion that Elijah and Moses represent the Prophets and the Law, thus linking Jesus to the story of Israel and of these two massive figures, but also saying, by virtue of his dazzling whiteness, that Jesus was a prophet unlike any other—that God was speaking in an utterly unique and unprecedented way through him.

In addition, the words God speaks from the cloud are taken from two OT passages, each emphasizing a different aspect of Israel’s hope. “This is my son” is thought to be a reference to Psalm 2:7, a Royal Psalm, emphasizing Jesus lineage to David.

The second part, “the beloved,” is thought by many to be a reference to Isaiah 42:1 which talks about the Suffering Servant who would be a light to the nations, who would establish justice, open blinded eyes, and set people free.

The composite picture is of the fulfillment of Israel’s hope—it’s royal king, but also the servant who would suffer for their sake. It is a scene that demonstrates Jesus’ divinity, but also his fulfillment of all of the diversity of the hope of Israel.

Peter is so overwhelmed that he just blurts out the first thing that occurs to him—“let’s build shelters.” He wants to stay up there, to preserve the moment, to contain and capture it somehow. Mark even inserts a bit of commentary in verse 6—Peter didn’t know what to say for he was terrified!

It must have been quite a moment. The disciples saw Jesus in a way they had never seen him before.

There had been plenty of confusion during their time with Jesus, but surely any lingering ambiguity about who this man was and what he was to do would vanish after something like this, right?

---

Well, perhaps not. It is remarkable to me how, despite seeing Jesus do some incredible things, this did not always (or even often) lead to a clearer vision of who Jesus is and what he means. Even in the surrounding chapters in Mark, we see this.

In Mark 8, the disciples have no sooner seen Jesus feed four thousand people with a few loaves of bread, when Jesus is marveling at their lack of understanding at his warning to beware of the “yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod” (Mark 8:14-21).

Also in Mark 8, Peter’s famous response to Jesus’ “who do you say that I am?” question, is followed by his rebuke of Jesus’ when he begins to tell them that he will be rejected, killed by the authorities, and will rise again (Mark 8:31-33).

In Mark 9, the disciples spend most of the journey to Capernaum arguing about who is the greatest among them (Mark 9:33-37).

In Mark 10, only one chapter *after* the Transfiguration, James and John, two of the people who had *been with* Jesus on the mountain get into an argument about who would get the seats of honour in Jesus’ kingdom (Mark 10:35-45).

Despite being with Jesus and witnessing astonishing signs of the kingdom of God, the disciples still fail to see Jesus. They fail to see who he is and the implications of following him.

Throughout the gospels, the disciples tend to see in Jesus what they want to see. Jesus is constantly correcting them, explaining things to them, rebuking them, showing them that he is a different kind of king who is ushering in a very different kind of kingdom than they expected (or, perhaps, wanted!).

---

I wonder: is it any different for us? Even those of us who have been walking with Jesus for some time. Perhaps we, too, tend to see what we want to see in Jesus.

There are many critics of the evangelical church in the United States who point out that the Jesus *they* see is an inaccurate one—their Jesus is a right-wing, war-sanctioning, capitalism-endorsing Republican.

These critiques are often valid and desperately necessary.

But I think if there's one thing we learn from Jesus, it's that we have to look at ourselves before offering commentary on others. We must always ask how the Jesus we see reflects our own preferences and desires.

As Mennonites, for example, we tend to see the Jesus who preached and embodied peace and nonviolence very clearly. But do we also see the Jesus who preached difficult words about judgment? The same Jesus who tells us to turn the other cheek also has more to say about hell than anyone else in Scripture!

This is just one example. There are many others, no doubt.

The point is that, like the first disciples and every follower of Jesus since, the Jesus who confronts is the one with whom we must deal, not the Jesus we would prefer.

We need to be constantly open to having our vision of Jesus sharpened, expanded, corrected, reoriented, and transformed.

---

Our second text this morning is from 2 Corinthians 4:3-6. Paul talks about how there are forces at work in this world that prevent us from seeing Jesus clearly and about how it is God himself who gives knowledge of himself.

Paul knows full well what he is talking about. Remember his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)? Paul thought he understood very well who God was and what he wanted, and spent the first part of his life passionately defending "the truth" (as he saw it) and stamping out this Jesus movement that threatened the orthodoxy he had learned so well.

And then, Jesus blinded him so that he could see properly.

God gave him a clear vision of who Jesus was and he became the greatest evangelist the church has ever seen, a figure hugely important in the growth of the early church.

Last weekend at the church retreat, Annie told me about a conversation she had with someone at her office. The question was, "why do you go to church? Isn't church just more or less a compassionate social club?"

It's a tough question. I've been thinking about it all week.

Of course, I think the church is more than a compassionate social club. While we do hope that people connect socially at church, and while we do promote compassion and peace and wholeness, and all of that good stuff, I think that,

fundamentally, **we are a part of this thing called church because we have caught a glimpse of Jesus and we want to see him more clearly, and worship him more truly, and follow him more closely.**

God himself has shone in our hearts, to use Paul's language in our second text today, giving us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This is no simple process. It is a journey—the work of a lifetime.

But what our texts this morning remind us is that it is *God* who confronts *us*. Our expectations and preferences for a deity are not the starting point or the primary criterion.

Eric Weiner's approach to faith is a common one today—God is sought to whatever extent he meets *our* needs, satisfies *our* longings, gives *our* lives meaning and purpose.

Much of this is good—we should *expect* that our deepest longings would find their fulfillment in God.

But it is important to say that, when it comes to God the consumer or the customer is not always right.

Sometimes what we want is what we get when it comes to God, but sometimes God makes us uncomfortable. Sometimes God asks hard questions of us—questions we would prefer not to ask.

Sometimes, as with the disciples on the mountain, we see a vision of Jesus that is simultaneously breathtaking, confusing, and terrifying, and we're not sure how to respond.

Sometimes, as with Paul, God grabs hold of us and turns us around.

At *all* times, whether our vision is clear or cloudy or somewhere in between, we walk with hope and confidence that the one who has promised to help us to see Jesus more clearly is faithful and will help us to see what we need to see.

Thanks be to God.