

**Wasting God's Time  
Mark 9:2-9**

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Fourth Presbyterian Church—4:00 Worship  
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There are a handful of things that Jesus didn't really plan for, things he didn't really prepare his followers for. Things might have been a lot simpler if he had.

For example, we're in the midst of a presidential election year. Jesus didn't really plan for how his movement would interact with politics. If anything, scholars have demonstrated that Jesus stood in clear opposition to the Roman Empire. I don't think he ever envisioned that Christianity would eventually be adopted by the Roman Empire, especially since Christianity didn't really change the empire that much—rather, the empire changed Christianity.

Jesus, a first century Jewish subject of the Roman Empire, certainly never established clear plans for how his way of faith and life could mesh with a representative democracy like the United States. This is why you have people on the right, left, and in-between claiming his authority, or even the authority of the entire Bible, to support their particular political agendas. Just this morning we read headlines about Republican hopeful Rick Santorum saying that President Obama follows a theology not based on the Bible. I don't think Jesus ever imagined that he would one day become a pawn in the political theater of a global superpower like the United States.

But here we are, and I sure wish things were clearer. I wish that it was more obvious to us how to translate Jesus' good news about God's kingdom into political philosophy and public policy. Jesus never planned for such a project. Neither did the early church. In fact, since they thought the world would end at any time, they didn't really make long term plans at all.

Nearly two thousand years later, we realize that this is another thing Jesus never planned for. He didn't set up a long game strategy for how his movement—his *revolution*—would develop into an institution. This is what I want to talk about today.

I've just completed—or mostly completed—sixteen months of service on a commission of the national Presbyterian Church (USA) that explored in depth how our denomination is structured and how we might change those structures to better adapt to and serve a rapidly changing world. For sixteen months I met with twenty other Presbyterians from around the country and Puerto Rico to study, listen, vision, plan, and debate. It was at times frustrating, yet at most times stimulating. We worked hard together and eventually hammered out some relatively bold proposals for the church to consider and act on at the General Assembly this summer.

Over the course of those sixteen months, and for the ten days in the summer of 2010 that I served as a commissioner to the General Assembly, and when I participate in various ways in the work of the Presbytery of Chicago, and when I am involved in the complicated maintenance of the institution of Fourth Church, I often wrestle with a pretty simple question that the church—in all of its expressions—ought to think about more often: *what does any of this really have to do with Jesus' good news of God's kingdom?*

When I read the gospels and reflect on how Jesus understood his mission, I don't see a lot in there about building or maintaining institutions. The same thing goes for what we can learn about the early church in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters. They were too busy actually spreading the good news to worry much about institutional establishment or maintenance. Sure, they made some very basic provisions for leadership and organization, but

by and large there is no clear pattern in the early church for how to be an institutional community of faith.

Rather, these things developed over time. The Roman Catholic Church was clearly shaped by the Roman Empire. The various strands of Protestantism were shaped by nascent shifts from empire to democracy and eventually contributed to those revolutions in mutually generative ways. Now, nearly five hundred years later, in addition to Catholic and Orthodox churches, there are thousands of Protestant denominations. Each has a different way of organizing itself and functioning as a corporate institution.

This takes a lot of time and a lot of work. Over the course of the last few years, I have devoted countless hours to institutional church work. And I'm just one of thousands of people that do this in the Presbyterian Church alone. Think of all the Christians around the globe and how much time and energy is spent on this kind of thing.

All the while, God's children are lost. God's children are starving. God's children are hungry. God's children are killing each other. God's children are dying from preventable diseases. God's children are oppressed because of the color of their skin, their gender, their sexual orientation, their religion.

And we sit in committees and commissions. We argue about statements of social advocacy that no one pays attention to. We make symbolic gestures that don't accomplish a thing. We debate rules and regulations. We craft policies and procedures. We draft vision statements and strategic plans. We build buildings and balance budgets. We sit in fancy rooms to listen to people talk and enjoy good music.

What are we doing? Is this the kingdom of God? Is this what Jesus had in mind? Is this what Jesus died for?



Jesus took his closest disciples with him up on a mountain to be alone. Before their eyes he was transformed into something beyond words. His presence was shining like a bright light. Two of their ancient heroes, Moses and Elijah, were standing there talking with him. It was unlike anything they had ever seen. They had witnessed Jesus do some pretty remarkable things, but this was something altogether different.

What happened up on that mountain is hard for us to know with any certainty or precision. But this story represents something essential and profound about what God was and is doing through Christ: *the good news of God's kingdom is about radical transformation.*

Peter, James, and John witnessed something incredible. They were given a glimpse of the mystery and wonder of all that Jesus represents. They were shown, in a startling way, that Jesus is here to transform the world. Jesus is here to make all things new.

It's pretty clear in the story that Peter doesn't understand what's going on and is even less capable of making an appropriate response. At a loss, and scared out of his mind, he suggests the first thing he can think of: let's build three shrines to memorialize this. Let's set up some kind of religious structure to somehow contain this incredible, amazing, radical thing we are witnessing.

Jesus doesn't even get a chance to rebuke him. According to the story, as if things weren't weird enough, the very presence of God came upon them in the form of a cloud and

God spoke to them just like God spoke to Moses on a mountain, just like God spoke to Elijah on a mountain. “This is my son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!”

Listen to him!

It should be clear by now how I’m reading the story of Jesus’ transfiguration this afternoon. Christianity—the church—is like Peter. We’ve been entrusted with this incredible, amazing, radical vision of new life, a transformed world, the emergence of God’s kingdom. And our response is not to embrace it, to join it, or to let it change us beyond what we are comfortable with. Our response is to contain it; to set up religious structures that may witness to it, but do not necessarily participate in it. We take this wild, unpredictable, and terrifying movement of God’s Spirit and institutionalize it.

Yes, just as Peter, James, and John were terrified at what they saw, we are terrified by what the good news of God’s kingdom might make possible in our lives and in the world. We’re terrified by what this might mean for us. “You mean I might have to change my heart and my life?” “You mean I might have to not only get to know my neighbors and enemies, but actually love them?” “You mean I might feel compelled to radically change my priorities and my commitments?” “You mean I might actually experience the presence of God as more than just an idea in my head? For the first time in my life, God might actually seem real?”

Those are frightening possibilities. Those are terrifying realities.

It’s much easier to set up a shrine. It’s much easier to build a church. It’s much easier to argue with each other about whether we have cookies or donut holes during coffee hour. It’s much easier to debate the most culturally relevant organizational structure or worship style. It’s much easier to fight about who God calls to service, as if we have some great insight or

intuition. It's much easier to *talk* about the gospel. It's a lot harder—and a lot scarier—to actually live it out.

Now, don't get me wrong. I understand that the institutional church has value in the world. I realize that there are things we can do when we organize together that we could never do as individual Christians or autonomous congregations. I understand that it is worthwhile to reflect on best practices and efficiencies.

Yet sometimes, I can't shake the feeling that we're not paying enough attention to Jesus' call to transformation and discipleship; that we're not paying enough attention to his deafening silence when it comes to the question of how we do church. There is an *urgency* to the good news of God's kingdom that I don't think we fully feel. I wonder, when we busy ourselves with church, if we're really just wasting God's time.

And friends, this is not just about institutions. Each one of us, as children of God following in the way of Jesus, has seen a glimpse of the transforming power of God's love. We've held a newborn baby. We've seen relationships restored. We've seen enemies reconciled. We've witnessed incredible healings and peaceful deaths. We've somehow managed to survive even the most painful of losses. We've been filled with unexplained hope.

We've passed through the waters of baptism. We've gathered around a common table to share a mysterious meal. We've heard somebody say something that opens our eyes to seeing the world in a new way. Our spirits have been stirred and troubled as we long for a vision of the world we just can't quite articulate.

We've been to the mountaintop. And if we haven't, we long to get there.

In three days we will mark the beginning of Lent with the celebration of Ash Wednesday. I invite you to come back to this place to begin this journey with us. And as we travel together toward the cross and the tomb and the other side of the tomb, I encourage you to remember Jesus' transformation on the mountaintop. Be aware of the glimpses of transformation that are revealed to you each day. And be not afraid of letting that transformation change you.

Stop wasting God's time. There's a whole world out there longing for what Jesus has shown us. Let's don't build shrines to occupy our time. Let's show others what we have seen.

Amen.