Sunday, February 10, 1991
HOLY BREAKTHROUGHS
Mark 9:2-9

The study of words and how they have entered our everyday language is fascinating. The word “breakthrough” is a relatively new word. It’s a compound of two old words — a verb and an adverb. The verb “to break” means to divide into parts, usually suddenly and violently. That’s what happens when you break a window, or a leg, or an arm. Sometimes we use the verb “to break” more figuratively when we say, “that individual broke the law,” or “she broke her promise.” And sometimes we use it poetically when we say, “the day breaks,” or as the hymn puts it, “Morning Has Broken.”

The second part of the combined word, “through,” means it is a complete break — all the way through, totally, in contrast to a partial break.

One historian of words said that, as far as he could discover, the words “break” and “through” were first used together, connected with a hyphen, in the Second World War to describe a military advance of decisive importance when the German Army entered undefended French territory. It was called a “break-through.”

Then, some years later, the two words were put together as one to describe a major advance in space research. On Tuesday, February 20, 1962, John Glenn went around the earth three times in four hours. It was a breakthrough into outer space.

Five years ago, in 1986, a book was published with the title, “BREAKTHROUGHS.” It contains the stories of people who, by finding big needs and little openings and filling them, made world-sweeping commercial breakthroughs that have, in some way, touched the lives of most of us. Some examples are the microwave oven, the Sony Walkman radio and cassette player, and the VCR (video cassette recorder). Behind each of these stories is a remarkable account of impossible visions made possible by human endeavor.

One of the interesting stories in the book describes how the little yellow “Post-it” notes with the semi-sticky glue were invented and were thought for quite some time to be a useless product that would never sell. In its earliest days, Post-it brand adhesive had to be one of the most neglected product notions in company history.

Heretofore, companies that manufactured adhesives of various kinds had one goal in mind — to make glue that would be more sticky, not less sticky. Glue makers were trapped by the metaphor that insists that the ultimate adhesive is one that forms an unbreakable bond. The whole world in which they lived was looking for a better glue, not a worse glue. What do you do with semi-sticky glue?

The inspiration of what to do with this unusual glue came to one of the people working with this semi-sticky glue in a church service. One Sunday in 1974, while he was singing in the church choir, the breakthrough occurred. Here’s how he described what happened: “To make it easier to find the songs we were going to sing at each Sunday’s service, I used to mark the places with little slips of paper. But these little pieces of paper would sink into the deep crack of the hymnal’s binding, or flutter to the floor, or in other ways come loose and get lost. I thought, ‘If only I had a little adhesive on these bookmarks, that would be the ticket.’ I knew about the

semi-sticky adhesive we were working on and thought it would be perfect for this use." And it was.

But even when the little note pads with the semi-sticky glue were manufactured, the people in marketing said it was a dumb idea. "Who's going to pay money for scratch paper?" they asked. Probably not enough of them had sung in church choirs.

Now, of course, these little pieces of paper with semi-sticky glue are seen everywhere in various sizes and shapes. They are a big seller because they do something no product ever did before. They convey messages in the exact spot where people want the messages, and then they leave no telltale sign that the message was ever there at all. They stick to pages of manuscripts without removing part of the manuscript along with the message, and they leave no adhesive behind. They don't make paper clip dents or staple holes. They can even be moved from place to place if you want them to, and their adhesive never gets tired.

However, when the unsticky adhesive was first invented, it was mostly by accident. The researchers weren't looking for a semi-sticky glue, and for five years it had no perceptible application. It was a solution looking for a problem. But breakthroughs often happen that way — they are unpredictable, maybe even seem accidental, and come at times we don't expect. Frequently, when the breakthrough occurs, we don't realize its significance until later.

The same is true for "Holy Breakthroughs" in our lives and in the lives of others.

When the birth of the baby Jesus took place in Bethlehem, one of God's major breakthroughs into the lives of human beings and the world at large, few people then were aware of the significance of that birth. No one could have predicted what a profound impact the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus would have on this world. To many, it must have seemed like a solution looking for a problem. What good is a baby in a world where the Roman Empire was in charge? What good is a man on a cross up against that kind of power? Only later, after the resurrection, did the followers of Jesus begin to look back and recognize what had happened and its importance. Then they could begin to understand God's breakthrough of unconditional love into this world and into their everyday lives.

The Bible is filled with stories of "Holy Breakthroughs," stories of God entering the lives of individuals and nations in fresh, new ways.

One day, Jesus took his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John — something like the group's executive committee — apart with him for a time of prayer. He had done that before, so the disciples probably expected nothing unusual to happen. Jesus took them up a mountain. Mountains are always associated in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, with experiences of God. Jesus took them into the mountain to get away from the crowd and to be where they could think things through quietly. He wanted to talk with them about the future, his future and theirs, and it was a dark one, a future of suffering and death. He talked about his cross and their cross.

Once they were on the mountain, a holy breakthrough occurred. The Bible says, "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." What is that word "transfigured" trying to tell us? You have seen, I am sure, as I have, faces which for a moment were transfigured, radiant — not lighted by a spotlight shining on them from the outside, but lighted, as it were, from within. They glowed in a way which you could not fully describe to anyone else or wholly understand yourself.

Something like this was what happened to Jesus. He glowed; he was radiant; he was glorious in light, and all the shadows disappeared. The three disciples saw him in a different light. They saw him as they had not seen him before. And they heard God reassuring them, “This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him.” Jesus had received that same assurance when he was baptized, and John, Peter, James, and John got the same message. To these three disciples, it was a “holy breakthrough.”

I’ve said this before in other sermons, but it needs repeating always. Don’t try to analyze too carefully those experiences which are ultimately indescribable and holy. You cannot rationalize them; you cannot pin them down to cold facts and figures. Never try to do it. It is enough to recognize that it is a holy breakthrough, that we are in the presence of the holy, and our response is to pay attention. Remember, the disciples heard God saying to them, “This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him.”

This holy breakthrough was the inspiration and the reassurance they needed at this point in their pilgrimage with Jesus. It is significant that the writer of the Gospel of Mark places this event a few days after Jesus had been talking to his disciples about the fact that he would have to undergo great suffering and that, in spite of the large crowds following him, he would be rejected and crucified. They didn’t want to hear that kind of message.

In fact, Peter had openly argued with Jesus about it, and the gospel tells us that Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” It was then that Jesus had told them, “If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.”

These words had caused not a little consternation among the disciples. They needed a “holy breakthrough,” an experience of the holy. They needed God’s reassurance.

God is constantly breaking through to us. It doesn’t always happen on a mountain. In a little book called A Religion for Agnostics, by Nathaniel Micklem, the author tries to put in simple terms what he has believed all his life. Although he doesn’t use the term “holy breakthrough,” he describes how God has broken through to him in his garden. He tells us about looking at his roses, and he writes: “I accept all that the physicists tell me of this rose that is breaking into bud; it is a system and collocation of electrons, a form of complicated energy; but when I see the rose, I am directly conscious of the Power; the rose is to me an incarnation of the Power, a very insufficient incarnation of the Power, no doubt; there has been a self-emptying of the Power that is expressed in this rosebud; it is a soundless, unarticulated Word of God to me; it points beyond itself to what which is beyond the grasp of human nature’s power. It is, I believe, an earnest or foretaste of the Word, that glory which I hope to know and experience hereafter. It points to eternal glory.”

Holy breakthroughs come in many ways and in all kinds of places, on mountains and in valleys, when we are alone and when we are with others. They may happen when we are depressed, lonely, afraid, and at the lowest point in our lives. Peter, James, and John were baffled by what Jesus had said about his future and theirs. It may be that they come at the moment when the outer crust is thinnest, when our defenses are down, when we are most reachable.

When they do come, be they small breakthroughs or larger ones, the important thing to do is to pay attention, to be reverent so that we can understand what God is trying to say to us.

We all need holy breakthroughs in our lives. Although they occur when we might least expect them, some environments are more conducive to allowing them to happen than others. Sometimes, like these three disciples, we need to go apart with Jesus, away from the usual routine of life.

We need to take time out to stop, look, and listen. Other times, someone may make a comment to us that causes us to be more open to God. The other day a colleague of mine asked me, “What has God been doing in your life recently?” It was a good question because it started me thinking, maybe God is trying to break through to me, but I’m not recognizing it because I’m too busy with other things. What has God been doing in your life lately? Think about that question this week. Keep your eyes and ears open. God may be trying to get through to you now.

What is God’s ultimate intention for us in these holy breakthroughs? I believe God’s ultimate intention is to make us holy. Being holy is what growing up spiritually in the full sense means. And only God can make us holy.

“But who wants to be holy?” you ask. The very word has fallen into disrepute — holier-than-thou, holy Joe, holy mess. We can do such terrible things with such wonderful words. Holy does not mean moral perfection, or “goody-goody,” or self-righteous. It means to have your total life open to God so that God can work in you and through you. That’s what a “saint” is. Saints as human beings have their rough edges and their blind spots like everybody else, but their lives are so transparent to something so extraordinary that every once in a while it stops us dead in our tracks.

It’s never too late or never too early to grow up, to be holy, to have reverence for life, for others, and for all of God’s creation. There’s an old hymn that goes, “Take time to be holy.” Then the holy breakthroughs will happen. Then you will experience what Jesus taught — that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and you will know also that it’s more fun — the kind of holy fun that we see in the lives of the saints, the kind of blessed fun in which we lose ourselves and at the same time begin to find ourselves and to grow up into the selves we were created to become. Amen.