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 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 "breakthrough," "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, 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 which 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 which 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 a 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 manuscript 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 and 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 signficance of
that birth. No one could've
predicted what a
profound impact the life,
teachings, death and
resurrection of Jesus would
have on this world. To
many it must've 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,
then followers of
Jesus began 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 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, 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, now 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

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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
any want 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 Nathanial 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 for 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 which 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.