Sunday, March 2, 2003
**THIS IS MY SON, LISTEN TO HIM**
Mark 9:2-9

"O my God!" You and I hear that phrase time and time again from someone who has been surprised. Even individuals who do not think of themselves as being religious will exclaim, "O my God!" when something unexpected happens. It could be an accident, receiving good news or bad news, a surprise party, an award being presented to you, or something else that happens beyond the ordinary. It could even be an unusual religious experience. Each one of you has had your "O my God" moments.

The story read today from the gospel of Mark is an account of an "O my God" event for Jesus and three of his disciples — Peter, James, and John. They had gone up on a mountain for a kind of spiritual retreat. Maybe the phrase "a mountain-top experience" originated from this story.

However, it needs to be remembered that "O my God" events can take place anywhere and anytime. Mountain tops are not a necessary prerequisite. "O my God" epiphanies occur in deep valleys, on level plains, in the middle of crowds, in large cities, in small towns, when you are at the bottom emotionally and very depressed, in a time of deep grief, and in high moments of joy. They can happen in a dream when you are asleep, in the middle of work, when you are jogging, when you are meditating, and even in a church worship service. You could have an "O my God" instant when you are listening to music or at the bedside of a parent or a friend, holding their hand as life slips away.

If you're like me, your life-changing "O my God" experiences have been rare. When mine have taken place, I was not prepared. Sometimes they might happen as an answer to prayer, and at other times they come like a jolt out of the blue. They are usually instantaneous and do not last very long. "O my God" moments cannot be manufactured when and where you want them to happen.

What all of these experiences have in common, wherever and whenever they take place, is that they take you out of yourself for a brief moment and remind you of a dimension of life that is beyond the ordinary and routine, beyond your senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. They are mysterious and transcendent. They are usually moments of intense clarity.

The three disciples who went with Jesus to be apart were not expecting anything unusual to take place. They were surprised by an "O my God" experience. Something happened that defied description. They saw their teacher, Jesus, in a wholly new light. They saw him in the presence of Moses and Elijah. They were terrified. They heard a voice, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him."

These strange stories are puzzling every time you hear them. They are in the Bible to remind you of the basic faith affirmation that there is more to reality than you can see, touch, taste, smell, hear, or even imagine. They are reminders of the Biblical truth that there is a God whose "otherness" contrasts with your humanness. There is a "Thou" that is not you. They remind you that you are not alone in the universe but are somehow intended by, created by, known by, and loved by an "Other" whom you call God, or the Holy, or the Sacred. The fact is, there is no one word that can tell you all you want to know about God.

These mysterious stories are also in the Bible to warn you against assuming too much about God — assuming that you can understand everything there is to understand about God or know everything there is to know about God. These stories remind you that God is not limited by the boundaries of your understanding. These stories tell you that your God is always too small. “Your God Is Too Small” is the title of a classic book by J.B. Phillips, a Bible scholar and British theologian. Phillips writes: “Many men and women today are living, often without any faith in God at all ... not because they are wicked or selfish or godless, but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to fit in with the new science.”

Every time I read this mysterious transfiguration story of Jesus on the mountain with his friends having an “O my God” epiphany, experiencing something beyond their ability to describe or understand, I remind myself that I should not limit God by the limits of my understanding. That’s the first lesson from this unusual story: God is always more than your understanding of God.

A second theme and lesson from this story is this: when you have an “O my God” experience, you cannot manage it or control it or put it in a box and keep it. That’s what Peter wanted to do in this story. He wanted to capture the event and freeze it. He said, “Let’s build three little shrines here, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Let’s honor forever what happened here. I also think he wanted to stay on the mountain, prolong the experience, and thereby avoid all the problems in the valley.

According to the story, Jesus didn’t even acknowledge Peter’s suggestion. Instead, he led them down the mountain into the valley where people were waiting — where everyday life is — where there was a dreadfully sick boy and a desperate father.

The lesson is this: you should not attempt to manage or control or package your “O my God” events. You are to pay attention to them, learn from them, and put them to good use. You have to move on. For these three disciples, the curtain was drawn momentarily, but their task from then on was not to keep talking about what they experienced up there on the mountain and how wonderful it was. No! They needed to move on. And that’s what happened in this story. However, right before Jesus led them down the mountain, they were all overshadowed by a cloud and heard a voice whisper to them, “This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him.”

“Listen to him. Watch him. Imitate him. Follow him.” That’s the third theme and lesson in this story. Listen to him as he says, “Love your enemies. Love one another.” Listen as he says, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Listen as he says, “As you did it unto one of the least of these my sisters and brothers — those who are sick, in prison, who are outcasts, who are forgotten; as you did it unto one of the least of these, you did it unto me.”

Listen to him when he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” Listen to him as he says, “The one who saves his life will lose it, and the one who gives his life away for my sake will find it and keep it.”

There is one more powerful lesson and theme in this story. Mark writes, “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to ‘tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.'”

Note especially that Jesus did not say to his disciples, “Share the vision with no one.” He said, “Tell no one!” Here’s a bit of trivia and one of my pet peeves. In all four gospels, Jesus only used the word “share” twice, once as a noun and once as a verb. He never told his followers to

go and “share” the good news. He said, “Go and proclaim the gospel.” Proclaim is a much stronger word than share. Not long ago, I heard a television news reporter say, “I’m now going to share the news with you.” The more I thought about it, maybe he was telling the truth. He was going to tell me only some of the news and keep the rest for himself. Who knows, maybe he kept the best part of the news to himself? If I ever hear a preacher announce that he or she is going to share a sermon with me, I’ll walk out before the sharing gets underway.

But back to the main point. Why did Jesus instruct his disciples to “tell no one” about the “O my God” event? He was saying to them and to you and me, “You’ve had a new experience with the Spirit of God and with the mystery of the Divine. You’ve seen me in a new way. It came unexpectedly. You cannot immediately understand or comprehend it, so don’t tell anyone about it. You will not really understand what happened here until after my death and resurrection, and even then you won’t totally understand it. You’ve still got a lot of spiritual growing to do. The most important thing is to remember what that voice you heard said to you: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him.'” In other words, listen and act rather than trying to impress others with your “O my God” experience.

Maybe Jesus was also afraid that these three disciples would use their “O my God” experience as a kind of bragging to the other nine.

He was following his own example. When he was being baptized by John the Baptist, he had an “O my God” experience. A voice descended on him like a dove and said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” What did he do? He spent time alone to sort it all out. The Bible says he went on his own spiritual retreat — forty days and forty nights. Only several years later did he tell his disciples about the voice he heard, and even then he was careful about what he told them. At one point near the end of his life, he said to his disciples, “I have many things yet to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” “There is a time to speak and a time to keep silent.”

You can talk about or try to explain life-changing occurrences too quickly. More often than not, they need a period of incubation or germination in your consciousness. Revelation is a divine communication that can stop you in your tracks and then lead you on another path, which will take time to figure out. You do not always understand instantly; therefore, “tell no one, until...”

You’ve known people who tell you too much too soon. They’re always talking about when they were saved and how it changed their life and how you need to have the exact same experience. Sometimes it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about it, and there’s not much energy left for living it.

The faithful mystics throughout history, who have known some of the deep mysteries of the Divine, speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and with difficulty. The deepest spiritual revelations are, for the most part, inexpressible. When you need to tell someone about your “O my God” event, you are to talk about it carefully, reverently, and humbly, with the sense that there is still much lacking in your knowledge of God.

The story says that God comes to you in experiences you cannot always understand and can rarely adequately explain to others. God comes to you in occasional moments of clarity. These “O my God” events are not the same for all of you. It is not important to talk about them or attempt to explain them to others. They do not happen often. God does not want you to keep returning to the event and build a shrine around it. They are meant to get your attention, and then, as in this story, God wants you to listen to his Son and to follow him — down the

mountain, into life, your own everyday life. And there, as a teacher, homemaker, nurse, parent, secretary, attorney, physician, coach, or volunteer, you are to live as his people, to love without reservation, and to give your life away. Amen.