

Transfiguration Sunday February 11 2024

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

This mountain top moment of Peter, James and John, Jesus' inner circle, happens exactly halfway through the Gospel of Mark and is appropriate for our reading today, Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent starts, because from this moment on in Mark- Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem and the cross. Just as we will from this moment on in the season of Lent.

This moment is the linchpin in the author of Mark's proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. And you can see this when you look at this text within the context of the whole gospel.

Remember, each of these four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is written to a particular community and they tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry to that community, speaking to their particular questions and needs.

This community that Mark writes to is one that continues to ask the question the disciples have of Jesus, "Who is this?" Which is quickly followed by, "And what does that mean for me?" This episode is at the turning point in that understanding for the disciples and for us.

There are things here that would be familiar to a Jewish Christian audience. The God of the Jews is a God of the mountaintops. That's where you go to have an encounter with God. You see it in the story of Moses on the mountain- where he encounters God, but only the briefest glimpse of his backside, because he cannot handle the brightness of God's glory. It is here God gives Moses the Ten

Commandments. Moses, who appears in this story, evoking in the memory of the disciples and the hearers that encounter on a mountain top and Moses' role in that foundational part of the Hebrew Scriptures the Torah.

Elijah, too, has a mountaintop encounter with God, on the same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. On this mountain Elijah experienced a wild storm with wind that broke rocks, an earthquake that split the landscape, a fire that consumed all before it. But God was not in any of those spectacular things. It is only after, in the silence that follows, that Elijah hears God's still small voice. Elijah is the one who was carried into heaven on chariots of fire and is believed to come again to announce the coming Messiah. Elijah appears in this story, evoking in the memory of the disciples and the hearers that promise that he would come again and his role as a Prophet.

Now, Peter, James, and John are with Jesus on a mountain. And have this incredible experience. They too see God in Jesus. A presence that (unlike Moses) they can actually gaze upon, walk with, talk with; but do they recognize that? Do they really see and understand? We don't know what led up to it, but suddenly Jesus is transformed before them, his earthly garments become whiter than any Tide product could get them. Then they see him conversing with Elijah and Moses. Jesus in conversation with two of the greatest Jews of all time, the embodiment of their scriptures, ones who have had their own encounter with God.

Peter, James, and John know they are seeing something of the divine, they are terrified, wholly freaked out. Trying desperately to overcome that, Peter wants to build three tabernacles- dwellings- signs of God's presence on that spot. He is

reacting to what he sees in a way that his experience, his faith tells him. But, like the disciples (and we) do time and again he misses the mark. But he gets some help.

Suddenly, a cloud overshadows, envelopes them like fog rolling in. And from the cloud comes a voice, “This is my Son, the beloved.” Sound familiar? Where have we heard this voice before? At Jesus’ baptism- as he comes up out of the water he sees the heaven ripped in two and the Spirit of God descending on him and voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Now, here, it is not just Jesus who hears that voice, but these three disciples. An acknowledgment of who Jesus is- the Son of God! But even more than that, there is both an admonition and a warning. “Listen to him!”

It is a warning, because they were already acting on what they saw, what they thought they knew about God and how God acted. We know this because just before this, Jesus asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter responds, “You are the Messiah!” And he’s right! But to Peter, James, John, the other disciples, the Jewish people the Messiah was a figure of power and might. He would be the great warrior, king, and priest who would lead a victorious army to conquer the Roman occupiers and throw them out of the Promised Land and restore Israel to its place as a shining city on a hill. A beacon to the nations.

Jesus, knows this, and immediately seeks to define what Messiah means. It means great suffering, rejection by the Jewish leaders, being killed, and three days later rising. Peter takes him aside and says, “God forbid!” Jesus then turns to the disciples and says, “Here is what that definition of Messiah means for you. You want to follow me? Deny your self interestedness, take up your cross, and

follow me. Take up not your sword a symbol of power. But take up what looks like loss, suffering and death and follow me.”

Peter sees in the Transfiguration of Jesus- in the brightness of his clothing the shekinah of God that shines like a pillar of fire in front of the Israelites and transfers to the face of Moses from all the time he spends with God. He hears a voice from the clouds- just like Moses disappeared into the cloud of God’s presence and Elijah on the mountain heard God’s voice. From that vision, Peter misunderstands, I believe, still.

So, God adds the admonition- “Listen to him!” It’s not, see Jesus. Look at him. It’s listen to what he is saying. Hear what he is telling you so that you can then see this event in the right way. So that you can understand who Jesus is and what that means to you.

The Transfiguration also ties us in to the ending of Mark. For when Jesus dies on the cross the curtain in the Temple is ripped in two. The same language used at the baptism of Jesus when the heavens open. A trip that also brings to mind this moment on the mountain and Jesus’ words here. And then we hear again a voice saying, “This was God’s Son.” But who is it this time? It is the Roman Centurion. A Gentile who had some responsibility for his death. Who should reserve that title, Son of God, for his emperor. Who knew about power, military might, political control. And who placed that title on the dead Jesus on the cross.

On this Transfiguration Sunday we sing our Alleluia’s with wild abandon as we get ready to put them away for a time. Before we begin our journey with Jesus to the cross we see once again a vivid reminder of the glory of the risen Christ. The

mystery of Jesus who is God's Son. Who is God. Who is God's best self-expression to us. One we can gaze upon and connect with.

But I know for myself, I want to make sure that I am seeing the Jesus who is and not the one that I want to conform to this world. And that can only happen when we listen to Jesus. Not just look but listen.

For the glory of God is not in bloody victory over humans. But a victory won through self-sacrifice. Through love and compassion. Through healing and welcome. Through engaging with those who revile and curse him. The glory of God in Jesus goes out into the towns and villages to proclaim the good news that the reign of this world is over and the reign of God is at hand. Has come close in him. A reign ushered in not by death and destruction, but by love and compassion.

We need the visuals- The brilliance of Jesus' appearance- that he is something other than just our friend. That he is the Messiah- not someone else. Not some political ruler. Not some victorious general.

A reminder that, like we sang not even 50 days ago, he is the Prince of Peace. The Holy One. Emmanuel. God with us. That the one who saves us does not bring war, does not use coercive power, does not bully.

We know who Jesus is, we know who God is, by listening to him. And we proclaim that to the world. We follow that. We glory in that.

For the Word that is Jesus frees people from the unclean spirits that bind them. Things that separate them from other humans created in the image of God. Jesus seeks to restore people to relationship with God and each other. Even when it is

hard. When it is painful to do so. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Keep an 8th commandment attitude towards others and look at what they do in the best possible way. When they hurt you, echo Jesus' words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

This is the glory of God in Jesus, this is the real power of God in Jesus, one that he calls us, invites us, to live under.

This is why we join our voices to sing and say God be praised! Alleluia!