

Between Heaven and Earth
February 11, 2018
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Today is known as Transfiguration Sunday in the church, and so we will be focusing on this mystical event as it is told in the gospel of Mark. From my perspective, Mark is the most accessible and relatable of the four gospels. I like the simplicity and realism of it. Jesus seems to me to be the most human version of himself, and the disciples are sometimes clueless and often deeply flawed in Mark's witness of the good news. I can relate to that. We feel the intensity of Jesus' confrontations, the contempt of his enemies and the fearfulness and disbelief of his disciples. Jesus has very human reactions to the frustrations and exhaustion of leading a counter-cultural movement.

Just as we begin to connect with and relate to Mark's Jesus, however, the divinity of Jesus comes bursting forth. So let us now turn to the scriptures and encounter this fully divine Jesus as found in Mark 9:2-9. I invite you to listen for God's word to you today:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Leading up to this ethereal moment, Jesus and his disciples had been on a mission across the countryside: preaching, healing, performing exorcisms and other miracles, and breaking a few religious rules along the way. It had not been easy. The disciples were often needy and confused. Jesus tried to take time away and get some rest, but people would always seek him out and find him.

Just prior to the Transfiguration, Jesus' messaging had started to shift. He began to talk about the costs of discipleship. The suffering, the rejection, and his ultimate demise were on the horizon, and he told the disciples so. Peter was not having it and began to rebuke Jesus to which Jesus famously replied, "Get behind me, Satan!"ⁱ It was time for a divine time out.

So Jesus decided to take another retreat, this time taking with him what I assume to be his most thick-headed disciples, Peter, James and John. They headed up the mountain where so many biblical epiphanies seem to take place, and what happened next is hard to understand. We are told that Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes. The word that is translated as “transfigured” comes from the greek word metamorphao. Another translation for that, of course, is metamorphosis. We don’t know what Jesus transfigured into, only that his clothes became dazzling white beyond what is possible here on earth.

One of my favorite things about this technological age in which we live are Memes, and I saw a great one this past week. If you watched the Superbowl last Sunday, you probably saw that Tide laundry detergent commercial that initially looked like other kinds of commercials such as a car commercial or a beer ad. You know, the kind of commercial you would expect to see. But one of the stars from one of my favorite shows “Stranger Things” known as Hopper pointed to the bright white shirts and clean laundry in each one of the scenes and said “Nope, it’s a Tide ad.”

It took no time at all for the clergy nerds in FaceBook land to create a meme that featured ancient artwork of the Transfiguration with glowing Jesus, Elijah and Moses. At the top, it read “This week’s Lectionary Reading” and at the bottom, there’s a picture of Hopper saying, “it’s a Tide ad.” As much as Tide might like to take credit for the Transfiguration, we are told that no bleach on earth could produce this level of dazzling white.

We also learn that two huge heroes from the Hebrew Scriptures made an appearance: Moses and Elijah. Their appearance raises so many questions. How did the disciples know it was Moses and Elijah to begin with? It’s not like they had photographs back then. The scripture also tells us that they were talking with Jesus. What do you suppose that conversation was like? They certainly had their own ups and downs as leaders, so maybe they were encouraging Jesus. Or maybe they were all having a laugh at the disciples’ expense, we’ll never know.

What we do know is that it was otherworldly. It was ethereal. It was somewhere between heaven and earth. We will never know in a literal sense what exactly it looked like, smelled like, or felt like, but we do know that it terrified the disciples. It got their attention. In the context of a very human existence with the usual politics, poverty, social injustices and corrupt religious authorities, perhaps it was time for the disciples to be reminded of whom Jesus really was and what they were called to do by his side. To have the presence of Moses and Elijah was to convey to the disciples that Jesus has some serious Jewish credibility, first of all; and then to remove any doubts of his Lordship, they heard a voice from a cloud that said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And I think this is the key: *Listen to him*.

Immersed in fear and trembling, Peter played the part of that guy who can’t sit quietly in awkward silences and said, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” I’m imagining that Jesus pulled a face palm at that moment, because that was never the intention of the Transfiguration. If it had been, it all wouldn’t have disappeared a moment later.

In the stress and pressures of day-to-day life, it is understandable that Peter wanted to hang out on the mountain, that he wanted to fix it in time, beholding the majesty of God. The truth is,

discipleship is hard. If we are doing it right, it is heart-breaking work. It is exhausting work. It is hard to love everyone all the time. And Jesus' rhetoric was shifting to sacrifice and death. Where is the glory in that? Peter didn't want to hear that. And often, neither do we.

In my research for the sermon this week, I came across a blog post from Robert Williamson Jr, a religious studies professor at Hendrix College. In his commentary on the Transfiguration, he says that he worries that the church "has gotten confused about where we are supposed to be. We climbed the mountain seeking to dwell with God. And once we got to the mountaintop, we didn't want to come back down."ⁱⁱ

I share his concerns that the institutional church has forgotten that the work of the church is down in the valley and not on the mountaintop. It's out on the streets and not in this building. We have made a cottage industry out of creating transcendent church buildings, ethereal worship experiences, spiritual retreats, and small group studies patterned after the self-help movement. We stress about numbers, participation and growth without considering why we want to grow. We've become addicted to the spiritual high that comes from encounters with God. We want to linger in the awe-inspiring moments, forgetting the end game of worship: to go out and serve God's children.

The point of the Transfiguration is to remind us that Jesus isn't an ordinary human being with special powers or a special calling. Jesus IS the Son of God. Jesus IS the Word made flesh. Jesus IS God. The point of the Transfiguration is to wake us up, to remind us who God is, and to remember what we are called to do. A voice called out from the cloud, "Listen to him." Are we listening?

If we have inhabited the pews the better part of our lives, and we are still clinging to those pews for comfort, we aren't listening very well. If we are not out week after week seeking to transform lives in the name of Jesus Christ, we aren't listening wholeheartedly. If our very hearts haven't been claimed and sent out into the world per the Great Commission, we aren't listening at all.

To be sure, the complexity and distractions of being human living in a human world are very real. The disciples themselves were operating through the context of an intimidating and oppressive government, gross social injustices and legalistic religious leaders who had lost their way. As I mentioned earlier, when Jesus told Peter to "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus accused the disciples of setting their minds on human things instead of divine things. So it is understandable that six days later, Peter wanted to hang out on the mountain to get his head straight. I'm sure he thought that if he could just keep coming back to those tents, if he could keep reliving that moment, he would have a better chance of keeping his eyes fixed on the divine. But the problem with hanging out in the tents is that the message never actually makes it down off that mountain.

It is God's intent that we would carry that divine instruction down off the mountain and out into the world. God knows that we can't do that unless we keep listening to Jesus through all the noise. It's important to note that the critical words that these disciples were meant to hear were being delivered in the midst of the mess and the hard work of discipleship. The only divine word delivered from the mountain was affirming who Jesus was and then directing the disciples to

listen closely to him. The actual listening was to take place when they ascended down off the mountain and got back to business.

God's act in the Transfiguration placed Jesus' word above all other words. We live in a particular context with multiple authorities to which we are accountable. But God's divine message reminds us that the word of Jesus trumps any voice, and I mean any voice that we hear shouting in our culture. We are to listen to Jesus! It's not easy to hear him above the roar. The world has so many other ideas about how we are to live. And those ideas are seductive.

The world lifts up nationalism as a sign of greatness and significance, that we should put our country's needs before the needs of others. But Jesus said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' And 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."ⁱⁱⁱ

The world values accumulating wealth for comfort, power and security. Humans reward monetary success with great honor and privilege. But Jesus said, "Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."^{iv}

The world says things like poor people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, that immigrants aren't welcome here, and that criminals will always be thugs. But Jesus said, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."^v

The world says things like blood is thicker than water and family comes first. But Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."^{vi}

Human beings are tribal, judgmental, and prejudiced against people who are different from them based on race, gender, nationality, religion and sexual orientation. But Jesus asked, "how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."^{vii}

Human beings bear grudges and easily forget their own sinfulness. But Jesus said, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."^{viii}

The world is afraid of change and of making space for new revelations of God's word in our midst. But Jesus said, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."^{ix}

The world says that the church is dying and that we must save our financial resources if the institution is to survive. But Jesus said, "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, for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"^x

Clearly, the brokenness of humanity has been around for thousands of years, and I've only shared a fraction of what Jesus had to say about it. But we are called to keep listening to him above all others. In these times of deep division, conflict, suffering and hate, the Transfiguration calls the church to wake up and remember who God is in the midst of the mess. Somewhere between heaven and earth, we are called to remember who we are. We are disciples of Jesus Christ who are called off the mountaintops and out of the comfort of our pews to listen to what Jesus says and to follow Him. We can do no less for the one who picked up his cross first. In the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Mark 8:38

ⁱⁱ <https://robertwilliamsonjr.com/transfiguring-silent-white-church-mark-92-9/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 12:29-31

^{iv} Mark 10:21

^v Matthew 25:35-40

^{vi} Mark 3:35

^{vii} Matthew 5:4-5

^{viii} Mark 11:25

^{ix} Mark 2:21-22

^x Mark 8:34b-36