

Texts:      2 Kings 2.1-12  
              Psalm 50.1-6  
              2 Corinthians 4.3-6  
              Mark 9.2-9

No matter what texts we are invited to read during the season of Epiphany, it always ends the same. We always sit before this same story of the transfiguration on the Sunday before the season of Lent begins. One year we read the account from Luke the next from Matthew and this year we listen as Mark tells the tale. I use the word *tale* intentionally because that is exactly what it sounds like...some tall tale told from the imagination of a zealous disciple. Few people want to say that nothing happened on that mountain. Clearly something happened. You'll notice that all three synoptic gospels tell this story almost exactly the same.<sup>1</sup> But it's hard for some to believe it could have happened exactly like Mark tells it. It's such a strange experience. I doubt any one of us have ever seen anything like it.

A century ago it was fashionable for pastors to try to explain the transfiguration in natural terms. "There was snow on the mountain. There was a sudden flash of light and the reflection off of Jesus' face made it seem like he was transfigured before their eyes. They ran into some old men and imagine them to be Elijah and Moses." Honestly, those kinds of explanations often get more fanciful than simply believing something miraculous and supernatural took place. At the end of the day, I'm not overly concerned with those lines of inquiry: did it happen exactly as the gospels record it? I'm not interested in that question any more than I care about how it could have happened from a scientific point of view. As it is in so many situations in life, the question of how (for me) is never as significant as the question of why.

To understand why the transfiguration happened, I think it's helpful to notice the conversation Jesus has with his disciples just before it. Matthew and Luke also record this conversation in exactly the same detail. Up until this conversation, Mark has been taking us (at break-neck) speed through Jesus early days of ministry - his authoritative teaching and miraculous healings. After the disciples get their minds around what Jesus is capable of (I'm sure in their first days and months of following him they were just

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 16.21-17.13 and Luke 9.21-36.

awe-struck), they must have started thinking about all that Jesus could do. Not just for individual people but for the fate of Israel as a nation...maybe they even began to think about the kind of restoration Jesus could bring to the whole world.

So here at chapter 9, the story comes to a stand still and Jesus warns them that the road ahead is not an easy one....they will encounter resistance, and it will be violent, in fact Jesus will die. Jesus then calls the crowds and says to them if you want to follow after me (as you say you do) know that you will encounter resistance....you better be ready to take up **YOUR** cross. (This is a passage we will look at more closely in the season of Lent).

Up until now all the crowds have seen is Jesus' incredible wisdom and miraculous power. Everything about him seems to speak of progress and healing and new life. Now he is talking about suffering and bloodshed, violence and brutality. If that is what they have to look forward to....it begs the question of whether they should move forward at all! Jesus just opened their eyes to the harsh reality of struggle that the path of God entails, so then he takes them up to the mountain to see where this is all going.

The Transfiguration becomes a glimpse into the final chapter of human history. The vision God has to recreate the world will not come about easily. Walking in the way of Jesus requires grit and determination because you will face resistance...from inside yourself and from all kinds of forces outside yourself. It's daunting to think about all of the struggle ahead and when you are in the middle of it the danger of despair lurks around every corner. Jesus wanted to give them assurance that it is worth the cost. He wanted them to see that when things go down in Jerusalem, it isn't because his mission has failed. When they stand at his cross watching him die and begin to wonder whether following Jesus was a mistake....they could think back to this experience on the mountain and they would know that he really IS the Messiah of God. The presence of Moses and Elijah was to make clear that what God was doing in Jesus was in alignment with what God had been doing in Israel all along. The memory of standing on that mountain looking straight into the glory of God, listening to that divine voice assuring them that Jesus is the Beloved of God....well, I'm sure it was their lifeline when the events in Jerusalem began to unfold.

You know how difficult it is to stay motivated when you are in the thick of

it and the end is not in sight. All of you who have raised children I'm sure can attest that there comes a time deep into your child's adolescence when you can barely recognize the sweet little baby you once held in your arms. You just have to imagine that this too will pass. The day will come when you will sit at their graduation or get a phone call when they start their first job....when you will become someone again with whom they will enjoy sharing their good news and asking for wisdom.

Several years ago I performed a wedding for the daughter of a friend of mine. Elaine raised Jennifer<sup>2</sup> alone for a number of years after Jennifer's father walked out on them. Elaine eventually remarried and her husband, James, adopted Jennifer. Those early years were hard on her and her adolescence was particularly difficult. She battled with her mother pretty far into her twenties. I can remember countless hours talking with Elaine on the phone or sitting with her in a coffee shop as she cried and wondered whether she was failing her daughter; scared for what was happening in Jennifer's life. Well, at the wedding after the traditional dance with the father of the bride, Jennifer had something to say to her mother. She had the room in tears as she recounted for Elaine what their relationship through those rocky years has meant to her...she thanked her mother in concrete ways for all the love, all the wisdom, and all the grace that brought her to that place. I leaned over to a mutual friend and said "oh, what we wouldn't give to have had a glimpse of this moment to share with Elaine during those very difficult years."

This is the last week of Black History Month and I was reading some stories online about some of the early Civil Rights leaders; people who came before Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in his generation. They were the ones who started the work in the 1920s and 30s when there was no national interest in addressing the legacy of slavery or the ongoing oppression and prejudice of racism....people like Vernon Johns who was Martin Luther King's predecessor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. I was thinking what it would have been like to show them just a clip...a glimpse of Barack Obama's inauguration. How the memory of that moment might have given fuel for the fight when it felt like nothing was ever going to change and they wondered if their efforts were in vain.

That's what Jesus was giving Peter, James, and John....a glimpse of where it was all going and why the struggle would be worth it. I'm quite certain

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<sup>2</sup> The names of these people have been changed.

that is why the story of the Transfiguration was so carefully preserved as it made its rounds in the early church. Acts reports the amazing growth and impact of the church after Jesus' ascension. But it wasn't long before those glory days met up against some powerful resistance. Mark's gospel was written during the days of Nero's reign of terror in the church, the first recipients of Mark's gospel needed to see this hint of glory as much as Peter and James and John did. In telling them about that moment on the mountain, he inspires them to hold on to their faith and to stay on the path of God because their rejection and suffering would be transfigured as well.

Patrick Wilson wrote about the transfiguration in the *Christian Century* a number of years ago: "The fulfillment of all things has a way of overflowing its banks and invading our time."<sup>3</sup> Praise God for that! Because if we never had any encounter with the glory and power and majesty of God, if we never had any glimpse of where the path of God is leading us, we might just throw up our hands and give up the fight.

Part of God's word to us today, is that we have to share these glimpses we have of God's glory with each other. I don't know about you, but I don't have nearly enough of these moments on my own. So I hold on to the stories I hear (whether they have anything to do with me or not) about places where God's reign is breaking through – times when people experience healing or have a change of heart or when justice is finally gaining ground. If we have any hope of going the distance in responding to God's call in our life (as we've talked about this whole season) then we need to stand on the promise from 2 Corinthians today: that God will "give to us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." There is a lot of resistance in the world to the ways of God – there's a lot of resistance inside of us. Disciples of Christ, Keepers of God's glory, if we are to overcome that resistance, then we need to make it our business to look for God's glory and to tell the stories of the glimpses we've seen so that the fulfillment of all things will overflow its banks and through us invade our time. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick J. Willson – *Christian Century* - Jan 26, 1994 – "Time Out of Time"