

A sermon preached on February 14, 2021 – Transfiguration Sunday – based upon Mark 9:2-9 entitled, “Catching a Glimpse of the Glory of God in Jesus on the Mountaintop to Sustain Us in Down in the Valley.”

In recent weeks we’ve been moving our way through the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Now suddenly we jump forward halfway through the Gospel to the 9th chapter where we hear the story of the Transfiguration

For the first seven chapters Jesus ministry has been exclusively in the northern country of Galilee, away from the power center of Jerusalem in the south. The common folk have been drawn to him by the innate sense of authority he conveys, including his authority over the forces of evil that oppress people and especially perhaps by his power to heal the sick.

He always heals out of compassion, never with the intention of calling attention to himself – in fact he makes a point of telling people not to talk about how he has healed them though usually they do. He doesn’t seem to want to be known primarily as a healer – his mission will not be fully understood until the whole story is told and to focus on his healing power is to miss what is at the heart of his mission. Nonetheless, his ability to heal people turns him into a rock star, with thousands flocking to him. Time and again he retreats into a boat or into the wilderness or up a mountain to have time away from the press of the crowds.

One disconcerting problem has arisen from early on in his ministry and that is the resistance he encounters by the local religious authorities. In their eyes he seems cavalier regarding the elaborate code of laws they so obsessively seek to follow. To their dismay he keeps intimate company with “sinners and taxcollectors” – defying the Levitical Holiness Code whereby “Holy people” keep themselves separate from “unholy people.” Perhaps most disturbing to them is he claims the power to forgive sin which in their eyes can only happen through the elaborate and expensive system of sacrifice offered at the temple in Jerusalem. In short, his authority undercuts their authority, and in short order they are conspiring to take him down

Through the first seven chapters Jesus hasn’t discussed with his disciples the truth regarding his identity. Finally, in the latter part of the 8th chapter in a quiet moment away from the crowds Jesus finally brings up the subject. “Who do the people – the crowds say that I am?” They answer, various sorts of prophets. Clearly the people can tell that he is sent from God, speaks for God, because of all the good he is doing. And then he asks, “But who do you say that I am?” And Simon with impulsive nature answers, “You are the Christ – the Messiah.” Jesus response is strangely curt: “Don’t tell anyone this truth.”

Strange. But we get a clue as to why this is so in what happens immediately afterwards. Jesus proceeds to tell his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to confront the intertwined religious, political and economic power center. But he is going there to “storm the capital.” He is going there with a spirit of sacrificial love, knowing his love will be rejected, and that the authorities will put him to death, and on the third day he will be raised.

And the disciples are horrified. So would you or me if we had been there. The messiah is supposed to come and set things right – not die.

Good old impulsive Peter takes Jesus aside and tries to explain to Jesus how he has this all wrong. Let's go to Jerusalem and drive the bastards out. Or let's just stay up here in Galilee where Jesus is a rock star and there is so much healing to be done

“Get behind me Satan!” angrily responds Jesus. “You do not know the way God does things – you only know the way humans do things.”

At this point he calls to the crowd to join the disciples in listening to what he has to say: *“If anyone wants to be my disciple he or she must take up their cross and follow me.,, For what does it gain a person to win the whole world, but to lose their soul?”*

And so that is the backdrop for the passage we are going to hear today. Listen for the word of the Lord

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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

This brilliant, radiant light – the light of God begins to shine forth from Jesus. Jesus is “transfigured”, not “transformed” which is to say he isn’t changed but rather now his essential nature is being revealed outwardly. The disciples have the opportunity to finally see Jesus clearly.

And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Moses and Elijah are two of the greatest figures in the Old Testament. Moses, the one who went up on a mountain to receive the Law from God, and Elijah the great prophet who confronted the evils of King Ahab, and who on another mountain heard the still small voice of God.

They are talking with Jesus – about how what is going to take place through him is the fulfillment of the long story in which they have played major characters.

Once again, Peter speaks impulsively.

Then 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."

Peter is essentially babbling. The appropriate response would be absolute silence. To experience the inexplicable mystery they are witnessing and not to try and figure it out – somehow manage it. His words make it clear that just as throughout the rest of the Gospel, he isn’t really comprehending what is staring him straight in the face.

(Peter) did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Terror yes, but not the terror of a horror movie. No, this is holy awe – the absolutely humbling and unmistakable sense that they are in the very presence of God’s glory.

The impression you get is that Peter would like to stay up there on the mountain, away from the trials and tribulations down in the valley. Peter's words also imply he is putting Jesus on equal footing with Moses and Elijah – in his mind a high compliment. But quickly it becomes clear he has this wrong.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, (just like back on Mt. Sinai when Moses went to the mountaintop) and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Note that this echoes the words we heard way back in the first chapter when Jesus underwent a symbolic spiritual death, humbly submitting himself to being dunked by John in his baptism. The words spoken then were intended for Jesus' ears only; here the words are intended to be heard by Peter, James and John. Note the the words added: "Listen to him!"

Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Moses and Elijah are gone. As important as their voices have been, Jesus is on a whole different level. It is his voice above all other voices to which they are to listen.

As 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.

Just as before – Jesus doesn't want them to talk about what they have seen – not until the full story has been told – the story that reaches its climax in Jesus' death and resurrection.

So why did Jesus go up on that mountain, and why did he take with him Peter, James and John?

We aren't told explicitly, but if I were to guess it is to receive sustenance and get clarity for the journey ahead – for Jesus himself, and if they can take it in – for the disciples as well.

The road ahead is a hard one. The story from this point on changes in tone. They are leaving Galilee and the adoring masses and are making their way to Jerusalem. The road they are on is one that will end with the cross. The cross casts its shadow on all that follows.

"Listen to Jesus", God had said to the disciples. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus doesn't do as much speaking as he does in the other three Gospels. He lets his actions do his talking. Perhaps Jesus' most important words were those he spoke right before the story of the Transfiguration: *"If anyone wants to be my disciple he or she must take up their cross and follow me. For what does it gain a person to win the whole world, but to lose their soul?"*

Jesus will go to Jerusalem to confront the evil powers that have taken hold of the institutions that dominate life. This confrontation will involve freely laying down his life in sacrificial love for those who have been caught up in these institutions and with their power threatened conspire to have him killed.

Underneath the evil that has them in its grasp, Jesus sees in them something redeemable. He sees the buried image and likeness of God in his enemies. He sees the light blocked by the evil that has them in its hold.

In the 1950s Thomas Merton was a young bohemian, intellectual, atheist – a Columbia grad student studying literature in New York City. God worked inside his heart bringing him to a conviction of the reality of God and he converted to Roman Catholicism. His new sensitized soul was horrified by the evils he saw around him in what struck him as a lost world, and he fled to a Trappist Monastery outside of Louisville, Kentucky.

The Trappists are the most severely isolated of monastic orders, but on rare occasions even a Trappist monk needed to venture outside the walls of the monastery.

One day Merton was in downtown Louisville when he underwent what was essentially a second conversion. This is how he described it in his journal:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... This sense of liberation from an (illusion) was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. I have the immense joy of being a (human being), a member of a race in which God (chose to become) incarnate... If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Merton continued to live as a monk but his attention increasingly was focused on the world outside the walls of his monastery. He wrote about the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, focusing upon the intimate connection between prayer and contemplation on the one hand and seeing clearly the evil that afflicts this world on the other.

We need to make regular trips to the mountaintop – to gathered worship as well as daily times of prayer – times in which we can contemplate the wonder that is Jesus and find courage and clarity for the life we are called to live down here in the valley. To be able to catch a glimpse of the light shining like the sun – revealed upon that mountaintop in Jesus – but hidden as well in every human being we meet – even those whom Mother Theresa called, “Jesus in his most distressing disguises.”

May the season of Lent before us such a time in which we begin to see more clearly – more as Jesus sees every human being we meet.