

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Each year, before we enter the Season of Lent, we spend some time looking at the texts of Jesus’ transfiguration—when he takes a few of his disciples and goes up on the mountainside. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell the story a little differently, but this year, the Lectionary gives us Mark’s account.

And for Mark, this story is about identity. Just previous to this section, Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is.

“Some say Moses, some say Elijah”, they tell him.

“But who do you say I am?”

Peter says, “You are the Messiah”.

Awareness of Jesus’ identity is growing for the disciples, but they don’t fully understand this Messiah they are following yet.

Then we have the religious authorities, who have no idea who Jesus really is, but they’ve seen enough to decide they want to kill him, to silence his calls for justice and inclusion.

And who do we say that Jesus is?

It is as if Mark is following along in our minds and knows that the readers are asking those questions too—who do we say that he is?

Mark puts the transfiguration smack dab in the center of his gospel, ready to give us the clearest image yet of who Jesus is—and for Mark, Jesus is standing in the long line of prophets who have been persecuted by the Powers that be. The imagery would have been unmistakable to his first audience. Jesus goes up a mountain, just like the prophet Moses had done to receive the law.

He shines brightly, dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them. This would have brought up images from the Book of Daniel. Chapter 7, beginning with verse 9. Listen to Daniel:

As I watched,  
thrones were set in place,  
and an Ancient One took his throne;  
his clothing was white as snow,  
and the hair of his head like pure wool;  
his throne was fiery flames,  
and its wheels were burning fire.

As I watched in the night visions,  
I saw one like a human being  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One  
and was presented before him.  
To him was given dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
that shall never be destroyed.

The reference to dazzling white clothing isn't there to make compelling laundry soap commercials. It is there to connect Jesus to the Book of Daniel. And when Jesus talks on the mountain, he is in conversation with Elijah, who is the ultimate prophet, and Moses, who is the embodiment of the Law. Mark wants to make sure we understand that Jesus' authority doesn't come from himself. It is more than a fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Jesus authority is greater than the law and the prophets.

After the transfiguration, it seems difficult to just think of Jesus as another teacher or healer. Although Peter tried, at first. He wanted to build tents to commemorate the event. He wanted to keep this experience somehow in the realm of human understanding. And perhaps you can explain away Jesus' teaching and healing and charisma in terms that people can easily understand. But the disciples experience of the Transfiguration was too unbelievable to explain away.

The disciples who went on the hike up the mountain with Jesus were overcome with fear as they observed the Transfiguration. This wasn't a fear that you bravely overcome the way Indiana Jones conquered his fear of snakes. This was heart stopping terror.

And in every picture of the transfiguration that I was able to find, the disciples all looked just like this. One of them is turned away in horror. The other two are upside down, falling off the mountain almost.

And while any piece of this transfiguration puzzle, individually, might have been enough to provoke this terror, I wonder if something else was occurring to them. Because, immediately before the transfiguration, Jesus had told them about what was to come.

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?’”

When Jesus started talking about suffering, death, carrying crosses, the disciples tried to stop him, to dismiss his words. But here, at the Transfiguration, do they become terrified because his words might have been true? I wonder if the only thing that might be more frightening to them than Jesus talking in the clouds with two long dead prophets is the prediction of the crucifixion and resurrection.

I had always heard this text and figured that God's voice from the clouds contributed to the terror. But I noticed this week that they are terrified long before God speaks to them. And what does God say, when the Divine voice speaks? “This is my Son, the Beloved: Listen to him!!!”

God's message to the disciples is that they should listen to and believe what Jesus has been telling them. Namely—rejection, suffering, cross bearing, death, and resurrection are essential requirements in the Messiah job description.

By the end of this text, it is pretty clear that Mark thinks the key to understanding who Jesus is involves obeying God's command to “Listen to him!” Which means that “Jesus self-

identifies as the Messiah who will be rejected and killed by the establishment, who will rise on the third day and return in glory.”<sup>1</sup>

And if that is who Jesus is—then who are we as we try to be his disciples?

While it is hard to imagine the recruiting posters that read—pick up your cross! Lose your life for my sake!—we shouldn’t overlook the greater promise here. “Taking up your cross” has often been code language for passive suffering for Jesus’ sake. But Jesus doesn’t passively suffer. Jesus suffers because he stands in the way of worldly powers who stand against God’s realm. So, to be disciples does mean that we acknowledge that there are consequences that go along with standing on God’s side. When Jesus conquered death on the cross, it showed that God’s way is stronger than the powers of the world. This is Good News!

Jesus was briefly transfigured before his disciples on that mountain, and then told them not to talk about it until after his death and resurrection. It is as if Jesus knew that even the transfiguration wasn’t going to be quite enough to help the disciples see his identity clearly. Only in light of the cross will Jesus’ identity make sense and bring hope to followers who want to believe, but who just can’t see it yet.

We are entering the season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday services here in the Sanctuary at 6:30. In addition to Sunday worship during Lent, we invite you to join us each week for Wednesday night services of prayer, scripture, singing, and silence. Larry Andrews has been working on the website and it now has the Daily Lectionary passages listed at the bottom of the page, so if you would like to read Scripture each day as a Lenten practice, the website can help with that.

However you use this Lenten season to prepare for Easter, I hope that you will keep this Transfiguration story in the back of your mind as we move to the cross. Together, let us keep working to be disciples, trusting God’s voice that tells us to listen to, to believe, what Jesus says to us. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams, in Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, (Westminster John Knox, KY 2008) p. 454.