

Sunday, February 14, 2021

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

2 Kings 2.1-12; 2 Corinthians 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/252874509735717>

(Sermon begins at about 12:00)

“Taking Up the Mantle”

Today we come to the last Sunday in the season after Epiphany. As we noted at the beginning of our Epiphanytide journey, the term Epiphany comes from the Greek, meaning “manifestation” or “appearing.” And in our Christian context, the Feast of the Epiphany and the season that follows focus on how Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God is revealed. Well, what happens today in our Gospel reading is the epitome of those revelations.

Just to set the stage, six days before going up the Mount of the Transfiguration, Jesus had revealed to his disciples for the first time that he would “undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk 8.31). Now, six days later, for some inexplicable reason Jesus takes his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain. As we heard, while there, “he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white . . . and there appeared to them Elijah with Moses” (Mk 9.2b-4). As if Jesus being transfigured and the two greatest prophets in Jewish history appearing out of thin air to chat with Jesus weren’t enough to demonstrate who he was, a voice came from a cloud saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him” (Mk 9.7). You can’t get a much more dramatic or definitive revelation of Jesus’ true identity. Well, you can, but we have to wait for Easter for that.

The scene of the Transfiguration is situated at almost the exact midpoint of Mark’s Gospel. “The first eight chapters describe Jesus’ ministry of healing and liberation and the last eight chapters describe the descent into his passion and death, arriving finally at the stunning news of the empty tomb.”¹ The Transfiguration is the point where everything changes. It is the transition where Jesus’ attention shifts from being focused on his ministry to him “setting his face toward Jerusalem,” as it is commonly described. This placement of the Transfiguration at the dead center of the Gospel is no accident. It is meant to send a message that the events depicted here are of critical importance. Mark, in the telling of Jesus’ ministry, slowly but surely reveals more and more of who Jesus is. As if leading us on a journey up the mountain with Jesus. And once there, comes the moment of truth. The moment when all is revealed. Well, almost all. Again, the full extent of who Jesus is and what he will accomplish will not be revealed until after his death. Until his Resurrection. And for that, we need to begin the journey down the mountain, with Jesus, toward Jerusalem.

Before we begin that journey down the mountain we need to linger for a moment. To take in what is revealed here on the mountaintop. To try to comprehend the significance of what has happened here. The appearance of Moses and Elijah conferring with Jesus, is certainly significant. Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah representing the Prophets. The Law and the

Prophets combined to represent the totality of the Hebrew Scripture, documenting God's relationship with his people. The Law being given by God to guide the people and the Prophets being those through whom God spoke to the people. In being transfigured and in conferring with Moses and Elijah, the implication is that Jesus himself is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. That Jesus is the ultimate connection between God and humanity.

That said, it is important to recognize that, as one commentator notes, "Mark's message here isn't that Jesus somehow eclipses or supersedes Moses and Elijah, but rather that he stands in profound kinship and continuity with them, both carrying on and culminating their work. In other words, Jesus succeeds them—and just as Elisha's succession of Elijah involves not a demotion but rather an exaltation of the elder figure, so too with Jesus. Mark honors Moses and Elijah in this story, even as Jesus steps forward as God's Beloved, the One to whom his disciples must listen."² Moses and Elijah paved the way for Jesus. They took the covenant between God and God's people as far as they could, by giving the Law and by guiding the people to live according to it. But now, Jesus will be taking the mantle. He will be carrying that relationship between God and his people to the next level. Which is what the subsequent journey to Jerusalem will be about. Where Jesus will undergo his Passion, his death, and ultimately his Resurrection. Solidifying in an unprecedented way the relationship between God and his people.

As if to reinforce the fact that the events on the Mount of the Transfiguration are not just about revealing who Jesus is, but also about enhancing the relationship between God and his people, God specifically speaks to Peter, James, and John. To the witnesses who represent all of us on that mountain. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" God is bringing humanity into the relationship in a new way. Humanity has a part to play in what comes next. That what happens next—Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and what happens there and beyond—is not something Jesus does alone. "Listen to him!" In other words, Peter, James, and John—and by extension, we—are to continue to trust Jesus. We are to continue to journey with him, following in his footsteps. We are even, like Elisha succeeding Elijah as God's Prophet, to be prepared to take up the mantle when the time comes. The events on the Mount of the Transfiguration, which Peter, James, and John witnessed and participated in on our behalf, were about preparing us to take up Jesus' mantle. To carry on his work following his own departure.

Paul seems to allude to this in the Epistle reading for today. In his second letter to the church in Corinth, he writes "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor 4.6). Undoubtedly, Paul was referring to the common image of Christ being a light shining in the darkness. The light that overcame the darkness of sin and death through Jesus' death and Resurrection. And while Paul probably was not referencing the Transfiguration, you can almost see this particular verse as alluding to that event. To the revelation of the glory of God when Jesus was transfigured, where the light of that glory went from being metaphorical to being literal. A foreshadowing of what would happen at the Resurrection.

One of the ways the reality of Christ as the light shining in the darkness was revealed to humanity was through what happened on that mountain. Where we were invited into the sacred work of carrying that light down the mountain. Where humanity, through Peter, James,

and John, were charged with sharing that light. But only when the time was right. Only after Jesus' Resurrection, when the fullness of Christ's glory would even begin to make sense.

By the time Paul is writing to the Corinthians, Jesus has been resurrected for about 25 years. The good news of the Resurrection and what it really meant was spreading like wildfire. Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth, is attempting to help them understand what Christian ministry entails. His comment about God shining "in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" is a reference back to an earlier image in Paul's letter where he reflects on his views on ministry. There he writes "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3.18). In other words, we are being transformed into the image of Christ. It is as if the veil has been lifted, in more ways than one. The veil obscures what is hidden beneath. The image of a veil was sometimes used to describe those who read the Torah without understanding that it prefigured the coming of Christ. A veil that can only be removed by coming to know Christ. The other image of the veil popular in Paul's time was that those who follow Christ are spoken of as having unveiled faces.³ That the glory of God dwelling within Christians is no longer obscured by a veil, but is free to shine forth, for all to see. This is what Paul is seeking to convey to his audience, and to us. That as followers of Christ, his glory, the glory revealed on the Mount of the Transfiguration and the glory revealed through his Resurrection, shines in us. That we are to allow that glory to shine and not hide it as with a veil.

The Transfiguration was a pivotal event in Jesus' life and ministry. It was the moment when the whole trajectory of his life and ministry changed from being about preaching and teaching and healing to being focused on fulfilling his ultimate destiny. In a way, the trajectory of our own life and ministry also changed, as Peter, James, and John were allowed to catch a glimpse of what was in store. At the time, they could not have completely grasped the ramifications of what they witnessed and what it signaled. Perhaps that is why God was so emphatic: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" A command to be open to hearing and understanding what Jesus was doing so that when the time came, the disciples would be in a position to pick up the mantle and continue Jesus' mission and ministry.

We are blessed to have the Gospels to systematically lay out the entire story, to guide us in our own life of faith. To guide us on our own journey of faith. Particularly at moments like this when we shift focus from Epiphany to Lent. When we shift from receiving manifestations of who Jesus is to preparing to live into the fullness of what it means to not just be his followers but to take up his mantle. As one commentator notes, "Think of this passage itself as a 'high mountain' at the center of Mark's Gospel. On one side, we climb up through stories of Jesus' healing, liberating ministry. And on the other side, we'll descend to the cross. Today, we arrive at a clearing on the mountaintop—and from here we can survey both how far we've come and the Lenten journey ahead."⁴

Blessings as you prepare to head down the mountain and begin your own Lenten journey.

¹ Elizabeth Myer, “Transfiguration: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Transfiguration Sunday,” SALT, February 8, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/6/transfiguration-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>.

² Elizabeth Myer, “Transfiguration.”

³ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2065-6.

⁴ Elizabeth Myer, “Transfiguration.”