

Sunday, February 11, 2024
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Mark 9.2-9

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1411447046137946>

(Sermon begins at about 14:10)

“The Transfiguration Transition”

Here we are at what is designated as “the Last Sunday after the Epiphany.” A name that I have always thought rather odd. Probably because I am one of those people who delights in picking apart grammatical oddities and errors—a result of having prepared technical reports for a living in my previous career, plus having a sister who was an English major in college. I find the designation of this day as the Last Sunday after the Epiphany odd because, at least to me, it sounds as if this is the last Sunday ever. That there should be no more Sundays after this. Which obviously is not the case. Unless the world happens to end sometime between now and next Saturday. No, we know there are more Sundays to follow. Now, I get why this Sunday is named as it is, due to the variable number of potential Sundays in the season after Epiphany, which can be anywhere from four to nine, depending on when Easter falls. So, alas, we are stuck with this seemingly odd designation.

But in some ways, it is the last. As we move from the last Sunday after the feast of the Epiphany and prepare for the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday, there is a profound shift in the tone of what we have experienced over the last six weeks, to what we will experience over the next six weeks. That this is a point of transition—a pivot point, if you will—in our liturgical calendar to be sure, but also in our faith journey.

Throughout this season of Epiphanytide we have explored the various ways in which Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. This occurred through Jesus’ baptism, leading to the beginning of his public ministry—his actions of teaching, healing, and casting out demons. Each of these actions revealing something about who Jesus is as the Son of God. We also see some of this revealed through Jesus’ calling of his disciples. Accounts which are meant to say something about how we, too, are called into ministry and how our ministries in turn are meant to say something about who Jesus is in our lives of faith.

All these events have been slowly leading toward the moment described in our Gospel reading for today: to the Transfiguration. The ultimate revelation of who Jesus is. Well, sort of. The ultimate revelation of who Jesus is really comes through his death and resurrection, which is obviously the focus of Good Friday and Easter. But what we commemorate today is the most profound revelation of who Jesus is this side of Holy Week. Today, rather, is a foreshadowing of what is to come, to help prepare us for the events of Holy Week and Easter.

The Transfiguration is a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus and his disciples. And for us as his followers. A demarcation between two periods of time: the time leading up to the Transfiguration and the time after. The time that the author of the Gospel according to Luke

describes as the point at which Jesus “sets his face toward Jerusalem.” The time which, from here on out, Jesus’ primary focus is on making his way to Jerusalem where he will undergo his Passion. A time of wrapping up his public ministry, of preparing his disciples for what is to come, including preparing them to take up his mantle.

While the Transfiguration is a key pivot moment in the life of Jesus and is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Mark presents it in a way that particularly highlights the pivotal nature of this event. Not in terms of the details presented. Facts are facts, and Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the same basic details. But Mark, in the writing of his Gospel, is very intentional about the placement of the Transfiguration in the overall arc of the Gospel story. You see, in Mark, the story of the Transfiguration is almost the exact midpoint of the Gospel. There are eight chapters leading to the Transfiguration, followed by eight chapters detailing Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, culminating in his death and resurrection. Or, as one commentator so eloquently describes, using the imagery of ascending and descending the Mount of the Transfiguration: “In broad strokes, the first eight chapters of Mark describe Jesus’ ascent, his 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 his empty tomb. The Transfiguration stands as the fulcrum, a high point and pivot point between these two great sections of Jesus’ journey.”¹

The pivot point that is the Transfiguration clearly demarcates a change in the trajectory of Jesus’ life and ministry. Yet, while demarcating a change in trajectory, the events of the Transfiguration, by all accounts, were not the cause of that change in trajectory. Nothing happened on that mountain, at least as reported in the various Gospel accounts, that served as a catalyst for Jesus radically changing course, leading to him setting his face toward Jerusalem. His whole life and ministry had been building toward that inevitability. This was merely the point at which Jesus would say, “now is the time. Now we finally begin our journey to Jerusalem.”

If anything, what happened on the Mount of the Transfiguration was more for the benefit of Peter, James, and John. Serving as a pivotal moment in their lives as followers of Jesus. Jesus was very intentional in taking these three with him up the mountain, so they could witness firsthand inexplicable events that would shape their faith and guide their futures. To further them on their own faith journeys and to prepare them for the roles they would play in building and leading the Church following his death and resurrection.

On the mountain, there were two key events that Peter, James, and John needed to witness. First was that Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Such an experience would have undoubtedly confirmed in their minds that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. And beyond that, an image that, in hindsight, we recognize as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection. Of course, the disciples probably would not have made that association in the moment. Although, who knows; six days before he had told 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” (Mk 8.31). So, they might have taken his transfiguration as further confirmation of what he told him.

Then there was Jesus' meeting with Moses and Elijah. The only thing that happened on that mountain that directly involved Jesus himself. Something that could have presumably happened anytime, anywhere. And yet, something that he wanted—that he needed—Peter, James, and John to witness. An encounter that would have sent the unmistakable message to those steeped in the Jewish tradition of who Jesus is as the one who stands in the line of the great prophets of their faith: Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah representing the prophets. With Jesus representing continuity with them, carrying on and fulfilling the work they began. Giving the three disciples further confirmation of who Jesus is.

In the midst of all these mind-blowing events, Peter pops off with “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” As if Jesus, Moses, and Elijah needed dwellings provided for them. Peter was undoubtedly stumbling for something to say even as he was trying to make sense of what they had just witnessed. Perhaps thinking that if they provided dwellings for Jesus and his guests, that would slow things down, giving the disciples time to wrap their minds around what they had just experienced and to try to make sense of it all. But then, God provides the ultimate response: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Bringing it all together and providing yet one more confirmation of who Jesus is. Confirmation that Jesus is the Son of God, but also making it clear that what happens next—particularly what happens after they go back down the mountain—is critical and the disciples need to pay attention. That where Jesus will lead them next, as he sets his face toward Jerusalem, will not only change his life, but change theirs, as well.

For us, on this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, as we prepare for the season of Lent, we stand in solidarity with those bewildered disciples on the Mount of the Transfiguration. This is a pivot point for them in what it means to follow Jesus. Similarly, this is a pivot point for us in our faith journeys as those who follow Jesus.

During the season after Epiphany, we have journeyed with Jesus, with each step revealing more and more of who Jesus is as the Son of God, through his ministry of liberation. With each step revealing more and more who we are as those who choose to follow him. Our journey has brought us here, to the top of a mountain: the Mount of the Transfiguration. Where with Jesus' chief lieutenants we have witnessed an even greater revelation: a glimpse into who Jesus truly is, into who he will become as he travels to meet his destiny ordained from the beginning of time. From this vantage point, we see how far we have come. And from this vantage point, we see the Lenten journey ahead.

Now, as we come down the mountain with Jesus, and with Peter, James, and John, let us set our faces toward Jerusalem, as we prepare to begin our annual Lenten journey. The journey that will take us down the mountain, to Jerusalem, to Golgatha and the cross, and finally to the mouth of an empty tomb. A journey in which we are transfigured into the Body of Christ.

¹ “Transfiguration: SALT’s Commentary for Transfiguration Sunday,” SALT, February 5, 2024. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/6/transfiguration-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-6>.