

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Transfiguration Sunday - Year B
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9
02/11/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

2Six 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, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5Then 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." 6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" 8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 9As 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.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Transformed for Something New

Good morning! Last Sunday the Synod wrapped up another Winter Celebration. As those youth went home they were confronted with a reality that all Christians must face after what we call a "mountain top experience." It's a lesson I first learned years ago, and it's one I'll share with you now: we must leave the mountain top... and life in the valley just doesn't feel the same. In fact, the longer the time and the more distance you are removed from that experience, the less tangible it all feels. You will find yourself struggling to put things into words to even explain what you felt. It's this last detail that always got me. When I would talk about Camp Luther

growing up people would always ask what made it so special, and it was such a challenge to put things into words. Because the reality was certainly different! “Come to a valley in the middle of nowhere in WV! The weather is cold at night, and hot during the day! There’s no HVAC in the cabins, and the whole place feels like a swamp! You get to enjoy the lack of privacy and showers that never have enough warm water! Classes are in a literal barn that’s been turned into a gathering space! No matter where you walk it’s likely uphill! Did I mention the bug bites?! You’ll love it! I promise!”

The mountain top is a special place, and scholars agree. Stanley P. Saunders writes that “*the boundary zones between the human and the divine are both disorienting and revelatory. Between heaven and earth, the everyday cues and perspectives that tell us who we are and how the world works no longer operate, but we may glimpse a new view of reality that transforms our understanding and refashions our world.*”¹ Such is the case in our text today.

I have often found the Transfiguration text to be a confusing one. We’ve been in a green “ordinary time” liturgical time for the past few weeks, but today we celebrate the festival of the Transfiguration, and the space is decked out in white. What makes this text so special? It’s a text that we find in all three of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But in order to try and understand it, we need to break a few things down.

The first is what comes directly before it. In the Gospel of Mark the events preceding the story are important. First, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Directly after this Jesus teaches the disciples that he will be rejected, arrested, killed, and rise again after three days. The declaration that Jesus is the Messiah and the transfiguration bracket the reality of the cross. This will be important later...

Next we need to discuss Moses and Elijah. Now, I have no idea how they knew specifically that it was these two that showed up, maybe they had name tags or something, but what is important is what they represent. They are the two most important people of the Old Testament. Moses represents the Law, the pivotal and foundational event of the Jewish people as they escaped from Egypt, and the one who first gave them the law. Elijah was the

¹ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, Volume 1.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 453.

greatest prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. Where Moses represented the handing over of the Law, Elijah was a reminder to stick to that very covenant. Scripture also says that these two both ascended directly to heaven upon their death.

Finally, we always ask why Peter wants to build three homes. Well, one reason is that heavenly beings need a place to reside. God had the Temple in Jerusalem, it seemed normal that if these three were going to stick around, they might want a place to stay. But on a deeper level I think Peter is wrestling with the reality of what we discussed at the beginning. When you experience something so powerful, something so good, something that amazing, you just don't want it to end! If they can build places to stay, they can prolong the event, keep the whole thing going. Because remember, when you leave the mountain nobody will understand. And this is why I think the Transfiguration is such a confusing text. It's precisely this intangible element that makes those times on the mountain so powerful but also at the same time so hard to describe.

Which brings us back to Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection. For the Gospel of Mark the cross is THE central event. The writer sometimes seems to be literally rushing us through the story to get to it. In order to understand the story, we need to look at it through the lens of the cross. It's the only way the story makes sense to the Gospel writer. This is why Jesus tells them not to mention it until after his resurrection when they're coming down the mountain. It is only as we look back at the transfiguration through the cross that Jesus' divinity shines at its brightest.

Which brings us back to our own mountain top experiences. Saunders writes that "*God enters the story to uncover what has been hidden from human perception or recognition.*"² Within this story we are shown a glimpse of the true reality that shines in Jesus Christ. God in the flesh. In our own time on the mountain we catch similar glimpses. While our eyes are often covered, every once in a while we get a glimpse of something more... something holy... something divine.

But we can't stay in those places. Like the disciples we need to come down and get to work. Here in the valley the reality of life can often set in, bringing us down and beating us up. But hear the good news. Jesus Christ

² Ibid.

has risen! And in those moments of uncertainty we remember our time on the mountain, an experience we can't exactly put a finger on, but one which gives us hope nonetheless. Amen.