

February 11, 2018
Transfiguration Sunday
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GOSPEL

Mark 9:2-9

The holy gospel according to Saint Mark, the ninth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Today we approach the threshold of Lent...which is coming so soon. Soon we will be on our way again, and Jesus will lead us to the Cross and we will dwell in the depths of the human condition with him. Soon we will take again this journey of human suffering, sinfulness, and repentance...

And before we walk that road...we receive a reminder of the Jesus who is as divine as he is human. His humanity is more than what we know, what we have ever known. His divinity changes everything.

And we see him in the bright light of divinity today in Mark's telling...The details are so specific and strange... "from six days later...to Moses and Elijah...and three dwellings...when a cloud overshadowed them...and a voice spoke..." Strangest of all, perhaps, is the sudden, blinding brightness of Jesus' clothing...and the Bible's only mention of bleach (though it's not exactly "bleach" in the Greek...but that's an ancient language rabbit hole for another day).

This gospel came just one week too late for me to wonder if David Harbour was going to stroll into the middle of it and claim the whole Bible is actually a Tide ad. So, that explanation isn't going to help us, either.

And Peter famously stammers out an attempt at responding to the incredible scene that surrounds him, "It is good for us to be here..." he says. And...it is. It is strange, and it is frightening, and it is new and unexpected and awesome and wonderful and weird...and...good.

This is a day in the church's story when we are often reminded that when we come to life's mountaintops, we don't get to stay. We must trudge back down the mountain again and into our daily lives and world. We can't stay in the mountaintop moments, because we are called into the journey that goes on in the valley below...but maybe we don't talk enough about how being on the mountain changes every moment after...Perhaps we don't talk enough about how our everyday lives and world are also strange and frightening and new and unexpected and awesome and wonderful and weird...and...good...too. Maybe the mountains and valleys are less separable than we think.

Today – there is a blinding light, high above the world of everyday life...It is nothing like anything else...but how does being there change everything else? I wonder what other moments have been like that...I wonder about the athletes who climbed that tall staircase with the Olympic torch...the skiers perched hundreds of meters atop a sloping jump...skaters both feet launched off the ice...the world spinning around them...

And they are just the ones who push the limits of what is *humanly* possible. What about the one who are brought beyond human possibilities...and to the mountain of God?

I think of Dr. King proclaiming his vision for humanity's future...saying that he had been to the mountain, too. And I believe he had...along with a precious few who have been caught up into the vision of God.

But then...what is it like to return to earth after that... feet on the ground... fanfares faded... vision maybe less clear?

Surely we are not unchanged. Jesus, does not stay a brilliant, blinding light beyond that moment...but something is different, and we have seen a glimpse of it.

Like Peter, we may want to camp out where we are...but when we are in the midst of a transfiguration, we can't stay...because transfiguration is active, ongoing...it's not a place we stay...by definition...it's a threshold...a waystation. We can't get where we are going without it, but we can't stay.

And people, I think, spend a lot of time trying to stay in places which we are only ever passing through. I know I do, anyway.

A colleague of mine was serving as an interim pastor in a congregation where I worked. She was getting ready to move into a permanent call, and she was so eager to settle into something for awhile. To have a minute to take off her coat and put up her feet. We stood in the hallway between meetings one day...and she talked about how eager she was...after years of transition...going back to school for a second career...going on internship...finishing a first call...taking an interim call...and now, maybe, finally setting up an office that would be her own for years... "I'm just so excited to finally not be in transition..." she said...as we stood in the hallway between meetings...and she paused and said... "Then again...if I look back far enough...I don't know when I haven't been in transition. Maybe that's just what life is..."

Things are always changing...always in transition...we are always on our way to becoming who we really are. Sometimes that sounds really good. And sometimes it just sounds exhausting. Perhaps Peter was a still little out of breath from the climb when he saw Jesus shining bright...and apparitions of age old prophets around him. Perhaps he hadn't even really taken it in yet. He thought, "Moses and Elijah...shiny Jesus? Sure. Ok good. Well, let's sit down awhile. I'll make tents for everybody. It's fine. It's whatever. It's good to be here. I'm just going to sit...and close my eyes...for a minute...Maybe I'm already asleep and this is just a high altitude dream."

Even when change is good, it is difficult. New chapters begin and end without us choosing it that way. And maybe that is good sometimes. The story we might choose to write might not be much of a page-turner.

Even our lives in community are always changing, as ones we love come into our lives...and leave...and as ministry changes over time. Today we will offer blessing on the closing of a ministry we have loved here, Family Promise, where neighbors without permanent housing have had the chance to stay here at Peace for a week at a time, while volunteers helped offer food, rides, hospitality, and friendship.

Sometimes chapters begin and end without us choosing how it will happen, but we can give thanks to God for what has been, even as we wonder what will be next. And we will do that today.

And we don't know what is next. We never really do. But at this moment, on this mountain, we hear the words that are the foundation of our hope for the future spoken aloud again. They were spoken at his Baptism...though we don't know how many around him heard them: "You are My Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And today, the voice who speaks these words addresses not only Jesus, but those of us around him, telling us: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" There is only one more final time, when Jesus will be declared God's Son in this way in Mark...and that is by the Centurion at the Cross, who says it after Jesus has taken his final breath. These three moments – Baptism, Transfiguration, and Crucifixion are the moments when

Jesus' identity is revealed to us. Together they show us a living, glorious, crucified Lord...the one who enters our life, reveals the brilliance of God, and dies on a cross.

That God would be and do all of these things is a great mystery, and soon we will follow Jesus through Lent in the Way of the Cross again. But today...today we have been brought to the mountain so we know again who Jesus is. So we remember to listen to him...and to follow.

We will need the mountaintop moment to sustain us in the journey of Lent...and we will need the journey of Lent to understand the mountaintop moment.

And whether we ever come to truly understand or not...through all the changes and chances of life...we live in a world that is changed now and forever by the presence of the one who is God's Son, the Beloved. We won't stay on the mountain...but the mountain shines into the valley and beyond. And nothing can be unchanged if Jesus is here with us. And he is.

Thanks be to God. Amen.