

Transfiguration Sunday 2024
Sermon 2.11.24

Mark 9:2-9

Six 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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As 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. (178)

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. The last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, it always precedes Ash Wednesday. It always pivots us into Lent, the six-week season of penitence and preparation, the journey to the cross.

Party’s over.

And what a party it’s been.

Mark wastes no words in the telling. Jesus according to Mark bursts on the scene, his baptism a moment when no less than the heavens were torn open and the spirit of God descended on him like a dove and a voice from heaven spoke, saying, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And from that moment, everywhere Jesus went (and he went to a lot of places) he had the effect of manifesting the will and reign of God. He cured sick people and cleared out demons that made certain people’s lives impossible. He upended the traditions that no longer served their purpose of practicing God’s promise and presence, that instead had become mere laws by which people were reminded of their enduring unrighteousness. He healed more people, liberated more people, appealed to more and more people, and pressed upon everyone the imperative of not telling anyone else about him.

He pressed upon everyone not to tell anyone else about him. Like in this story we just heard: “...he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen...”

This was for reasons we’re not sure about. The so-called messianic secret: keep this whole thing a secret. For now, anyway. Oceans of ink have been spilled as to why. Over the centuries, everyone has wondered why? Why the secret?

It’s always tempting to scale things up, right? I mean, is that right? It’s always tempting to go bigger with something that seems to be going well. But some things go well only if they stay small.

Some things succeed only, or at least they succeed best, on a human scale. Especially something that operates in the immediate, something that operates in the immediate encounter between I and thou, in the words of Martin Buber, in the encounter between one living thing and another living thing. Which is how Jesus operates—in the immediate, in the unmediated arrival of holiness and wholeness.

So maybe the so-called messianic secret is about that. This insistence upon keeping secret: it shows up in all four gospel narratives in its own way but is a characteristic of Mark's telling of the gospel story in particular. Mark's remembering of Jesus has almost every encounter with him capped off by the commandment, "Tell nothing to no one."

In 2019, an article came out in *The Atlantic Monthly* that's stayed with me. James Fallows wrote it, about the fall of the Roman empire, actually about the era that followed the fall of the Roman empire. It's come to be called the Dark Ages but only because it's an age of things largely unknown. It's dark not because terrible things happened then but because we don't really know what happened then. The historical record goes dark, the reason for which is likely because things went local, events went local. Fallows writes of this age, that involved the "removal of centralized imperial control..." It, among other things, "opened the way to a sustained era of creativity."

Fallows sees this as a possibility for after the decline of the American empire, which may or may not be something that's now happening, evidence for which you may or may not be able to see everywhere. In any event, our national politics do seem increasingly sclerotic, even invested in total inactivity and ineffectiveness, and in response to this Fallows notices people all over the country turning to the local. He writes, "Based on my own experience I could give a hundred examples of this attitude from around the country, virtually none of them drawing national attention and many of them involving people creatively expanding the roles of libraries, community colleges, and other institutions to meet local needs."

It would be, of course, anachronistic to suppose Jesus was a localist of this sort. Jesus never lived amidst mass culture as we do today, never had to witness how mass culture and mass politics detach themselves from real life and dehumanize real people in quite the way we've seen it does in recent decades.

But he did live amidst empire. And, no, he never could have imagined the totalitarian tendencies that empires of today make us all suffer. But Rome did demonstrate what real power can do: conquer by means of enthralling people, dominate by means of that sweet balance of amusement and menace...

...which Jesus himself could have done. Next week, on the first Sunday of Lent when we follow him into the wilderness where he would be tempted, we'll see once again how very true this was for him. He could have conquered the world by entralling the people, by amusing and threatening in equal measure given differing circumstances.

A few times, in this first half of this gospel narrative, he might even have inadvertently come close, thrill the people, enthrall them!

But, no.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. With this Sunday, we pivot from Epiphany to Lent.

Party's over.

There's this strange admonition on this mountain peak. The voice of God says this, which has become a familiar claim: "This is my Son, the beloved," but then it also says this new part: "Listen to him!" It's strange because Jesus hadn't said anything, not aloud anyway. He just appeared there, quietly chatting with Moses and Elijah, which is to say emblems of the Law and the Prophets, this long and deep tradition of the people of God until now. He just appeared there, with these other two, not saying anything anyone could actually hear.

So, you have to look back. That's what I think, anyway. You have to look back at the last thing Jesus is said to have said, which began with a question Jesus posed as they were all walking along, going from village to village in Caesarea Philippi. He'd just cured a blind man, and then he asked, "Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples seem to have heard all sorts of things. They said, "People say you're John the Baptist. Others say you're Elijah, or maybe one of the later prophets."

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus then asked, bringing the question closer in.

Peter got it right, as you might well remember. "You are the Messiah," he said, at which Jesus sternly told them not to tell anyone, and likely because that would just bring people out all the more. The Messiah, the long-promised one, the conquering hero come at last to restore the people to their former glory, to trample their enemies and establish a kingdom that would have no rivals: yes, please!

And then he went on 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.

And it's interesting, don't you think, that our writer makes this clear note: that he said all *this* quite openly. Different from the awesome aspects, different from the ones that would have enthralling appeal, the aspect of being the Messiah that would have Jesus suffer doesn't need to be kept a secret. I mean, it's unlikely *this* would make his appeal get out of hand. No one's going to be interested in coming out to a man who is himself heading to the cross. We very rarely make celebrities of people who serve by means of suffering love. Why, even Peter would balk at this, would rebuke Jesus for even suggesting such a thing: "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!"

I'm convinced it's this exchange that the voice on the mountaintop is referring to when it implores those gathered here: "Listen to him!" This, the last thing Jesus is remembered to have said before gathering this trio of witnesses and bringing them up the mountain. This, the thing that Peter, for one, so clearly pushed back against.

This transfiguration is to push the disciples to see what it is so very hard for the likes of us to see: that glory doesn't foreclose upon the grotesque, that glory doesn't safeguard from humiliation and suffering, but somehow is intertwined with them.

See, because only a suffering God can help.

That's Dietrich Bonhoeffer. German preacher and theologian, executed by the Nazis after years of having witnessing Germany buckle under the menacing allure of fascism. Fascism: a political system which very much promises glory, for some anyway, while foisting its grotesque costs on "others," vermin, to quote our prior president. Bonhoeffer claimed it, knowing only too well: "Only a suffering God can help."

Because otherwise, you've just got gods who replay all that's wrong with the world, carving up the world into us and them, promising that violence can save us from violence, that its grotesquerie can save us from purported grotesquerie, though while just creating cause for further violence whose fruits are humiliation and resentment and retribution, these whose fruits are further violence. When history creates winners, it also creates losers, and losers don't forget their loss, their humiliation.

But seeing this is so hard. Seeing the need for a God who will plumb the depths of human cruelty and suffering so to take these on himself, the depths of human destruction and desolation fill them rather with grace which is to redeem them: seeing this is so hard. Seeing the God who will plumb the depths all the way to hell in order that hell itself might hallowed, and all might be God, and then continuing to follow this God, even devoting yourself to this way: it's so hard. We

would so prefer a hero. We would so prefer someone who'd just triumph, and would make us triumph, a god who would bless our ambition and our success, a god in whom glory just shines, never gets sullied by this disgusting, disappointing world.

We say to the one who instead moves toward the cross: "God forbid it, Lord, this must never happen to you."

The one who sent him to us so to save us says this in response: "Listen to him."

So, party's over.

But, let's face it, a party can be a little stressful. You have put on your best face. You have to make happy, which is fun for a time but can get tiresome after a while.

I had a friend in college who knew how to party. Every time we went out together, she'd pull my glasses off my own face and slip them into some pocket—mine or hers. "You look better," she'd note. "But I can't see as well," I'd protest—and it's already so hard to see sometimes.

We're headed to the cross, six weeks' time. The journey is slow because the Lord is patient. Thanks be to God.