

## **“A BLAST FROM THE PAST”**

II Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

You have probably heard the story about the man who was going on a long trip. He asked his brother to look in on things and take care of everything back home while he was away. After he was gone for several weeks, the man called home and asked his brother how things were going. “Well,” said the brother, “your cat died.”

“How can you just blurt out news like that?” asked the man. You’ve got to ease into that kind of news and give it to someone more slowly! You should first say something like, ‘Well, your cat crawled up on the roof.’ Then you could tell me that she stayed there for days and days with no food and water. You could say that you couldn’t get her down, and eventually got desperate, and had to call the fire department. They got her down, and took her to the vet, but it was too late, and unfortunately, my cat died. That is how you should break the news to someone, instead of just blurting it out!”

“I’m sorry,” said the brother. “I will try and be more sensitive.”

“Ok,” said the man.

“Tell me what else is going on at home. How is mother?”

“Well,” said the brother, “Mother crawled up on the roof....”

This is the kind of approach found in the gospel of Mark. The first sentence of this earliest gospel states, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” The gospel begins to relate the story of Jesus’ life. Mark starts off easily, telling us of Jesus the teacher, the healer, the kind of Messiah who is easy to relate to. Now in Mark 9:2-10, in the middle of Mark’s gospel, we have this strange story which is today’s gospel lesson, the event we call the transfiguration of Jesus. It seems so different from the reports of Jesus’ actions that went before it. What changed right before this event? What was the reaction of the disciples? How did Jesus respond?

First, let’s look at what has happened in the first eight chapters of the gospel of Mark. The gospel begins with easy, popular stuff – the baptism of Jesus, Jesus calling his disciples, Jesus healing so many people and becoming so popular that he actually had to flee from the crowds. Jesus teaches parables, stories like the parable of the sower, where the seed falls on the rock, and on the path, and finally in the good soil. These kinds of stories may be a little difficult to understand at first, but they have deep meaning, and are easy to remember.

One day, while Jesus is teaching, it becomes late in the day, and so Jesus feeds 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. This is a Messiah everyone can get behind! This is great stuff! He even walks on water and stills a storm! With each verse of the gospel we see a little more of the story. What a great guy!

In chapter 8, right before the account we read today, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers, “You are the Messiah!”

This is easy for Peter to proclaim, having seen all that has occurred so far. But the gospel tone begins to change right after Peter’s declaration. Mark tells us that Jesus openly and clearly began to tell the disciples about the immediate future. “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.” Suddenly the Messiah of the healings and the stories and the miraculous meals doesn’t sound so popular and so easy any more.

Amazingly, it is Peter, the same disciple who in the last breath declared Jesus the Messiah, who speaks next. He pulls Jesus aside, and the gospel account tells us that Peter rebukes Jesus for these unpopular words. “If you really understand that someone is the Messiah, would you have the nerve to rebuke them? Peter clearly did not understand, and Jesus responds, “Get behind me Satan!”

After this difficult teaching, Jesus goes up to a mountaintop to pray, taking his three closest disciples, Peter, John and James. There is a glorious manifestation in which Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. What does it mean? There was a belief among the faithful that before the Messiah could come, Moses and Elijah would have to reappear. Why these two? It is because of the belief that no one ever saw the two of them die, and so they must have lived on with God. Moses was alone at the end, and in the Old Testament reading about Elijah from today, we hear about Elijah who disappears up to heaven riding in a chariot of fire. In order to fulfill this Jewish prophesy Mark makes sure that we hear the account of the transfiguration.

This appearance is also crucial for the disciples. The disciples are at a low point, hearing about the upcoming death of Jesus. In this one event they get a momentary glimpse of the glory of the risen Christ which is to come. They get a reassurance of the promise at a time when they need it. There are going to be difficult times in the future for Jesus and his followers. The voice of God is heard as it was at the time of Jesus’ baptism. This time it is addressed to the disciples. “This is my Beloved. Listen to him!” In spite of the horror that will occur in Jerusalem on the cross, we have God’s assurance to the disciples. They get a small glimpse of the resurrection.

What is the reaction of the disciples? Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us that it is one of confusion and terror. Peter suggests that he and John and James build booths,” places of worship and remembrance of this great event. Mark tells us that Peter did not know what to say. He was at a loss for words, and John and James were silent. “They were terrified.” Why would Peter want to build booths? Well, maybe he wanted to stay there on the mountain top. Maybe he wanted to try and get a handle on things, or maybe he just needed to do something so he could feel more in control. This chapter is an account of both the glory of God, and our human inadequacy in response to it. For both the disciples and us, understanding

Christ is a process. We know that in our human understanding we barely see a glimpse of the real glory of the risen Christ, and like the disciples, we have confidence that in the next life we will eventually know in full.

During our minute for mission today, Paul O'Neal gave us an account of the progress of the building of our new sanctuary. It was good to hear how well things are going, and it is great to drive by and see the outward progress. But if you are driving down Augusta Road at night, you can get a momentary glimpse of what we will see in a few weeks. With the construction lights on inside, you can get a quick flash of color from the new stained glass windows. It is not a full view. You can't tell what the pictures are of, and you don't have a full understanding. The glimpse is exciting, but it can't hold a candle to when we will see the windows from the inside on Easter morning. As we will gather together to celebrate the resurrection, we will get to see the windows and the sanctuary in full. The glimpse driving by on Augusta Road is just a teaser of what is to come, but it is a nice assurance that things are under control.

For Peter, John and James, the transfiguration is just a glimpse of what is to come, and a reassurance that God is in control. It says clearly that they didn't understand, but in the weeks and months to come it will become clearer, culminating on Easter morning and the glory of the resurrection.

What was Jesus' response to the transfiguration? Remember, our theology says that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Was there a temptation in the human side of Jesus to stay on that mountain top, accepting the worship of the disciples and avoiding the trip to Jerusalem which was to come? In spite of the inadequacy of the human response of his closest disciples, Jesus chooses to remain faithful to them and to us, and to his mission. Jesus comes down from the mountain. The people below are immediately clamoring for another healing. "Give us more, Jesus!" "Do more for us, Jesus!" Even though Jesus is alone in his understanding, he continues taking the steps that will quickly lead him to Jerusalem and to his suffering and death on the cross.

You may have noticed that there is a color change here today in the paraments which hang near the Bible, and in the stoles the ministers are wearing. Last week they were green, today they are white. Next week, as Lent begins, they will be purple, the color of kingship, but also the color of sacrifice and death. This week we will gather on Ash Wednesday, the first day of the season of Lent, the season when we are called to reflect on the sacrifice Jesus made for us. For this one Sunday, for transfiguration Sunday, however, the color of the paraments is white. When I explain the colors of the church seasons to children, I always say that white is our celebration color. I ask, "What color is the dress that a bride wears? What is the color of the Christ candle in the center of the Advent wreath which we light on Christmas Eve? What is the color for Easter Sunday morning?" They usually answer, "White!" Next comes the harder question when I ask them what color we use for funerals. Sometimes they want to answer black, the color of mourning, but the truth is that the color for funerals is the color white, the color of

celebration. This is because we know that at the end of this life, a new life begins. We know the end of the story, the gladness of the resurrection.

This one Sunday, we, like the disciples, get a glimpse of the end of the story. As we enter the agony of Lent and Holy Week, we are reminded of the glory of the resurrection. Perhaps the transfiguration helped the human part of Jesus go down the mountain and face his destiny as the Christ who suffered and died for our sins, and was raised for us to new life. As we enter the season of Lent, we come into weeks of reflection, prayer and contemplation. The glimpse of the glory of the risen Christ can help us during these weeks as it helped the disciples. We can remember it as we think of Jesus who left the mountaintop and followed his destiny to the streets of Jerusalem. We can remember it as we think of the beaten Jesus who picked up his cross, and carried it to Calvary for the sake of his followers, then and now.

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