

Transfiguration Sunday Sermon

February 14, 2021

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash for Pilgrim Church

Text

Mark 9:2-9

2 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, 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.

9 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

Sabbaths 2014- VI

by Wendell Berry

Up in the blown-down woods
you try to imagine the tornado
cracking through the trees
while you slept, branches
and birds' eggs whirling
in the dark. You can't do it.
You can imagine the place
as it was, and as it is.

The moment of transformation
the presence of creation,
itself beyond your reach.

Sermon

For those of you following along week to week in your Bibles, you may be wondering why we skipped 7 chapters of Mark between last week and this week - and why we'll be meandering around all over the place in the next few weeks. I want to take a moment to talk about the oddity of the Lectionary cycle before I get into this week's text because it really can be a bit confusing. We have a suggested calendar of texts that I tend to follow, mostly, that includes the big days - Christmas, Easter, Pentecost - and a whole lot of "ordinary time" that takes up most of the summer and fall - and some lesser known landmarks such as today's Transfiguration Sunday. The Lectionary organizers must have noticed that Jesus' transfiguration takes place right in the middle of each of the three gospels and indeed is a pivot moment in the texts - so they put Transfiguration Sunday right in the middle between all the other big days. That makes sense if you're reading the gospels start to finish, to put the middle in the middle - but our lectionary jumps around.

Last week we asked our confirmation class to read and talk about the whole of the gospel of Mark, and we had a great conversation. One of the comments was that after a lifetime of hearing short passages that seem disconnected on Sunday mornings, it was good to read one whole gospel, start to finish, to get a sense of the arc of the story. I am telling you this as an invitation, if you ever feel lost as we jump around from passage to passage, you might do the same.

So this morning, let me catch you up on the arc of Mark's narrative. Mark starts by telling us this is good news - and connecting Jesus to John the Baptist, telling us of Jesus' baptism and the words Jesus hears from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved;^[h] with you I am well pleased."

Jesus tempted, and then starts his ministry. He recruits apostles and other close followers, he teaches, he heals, he goes from Tyre to Sidon - which means all over the place. He feeds thousands of people, he keeps healing people who he's not supposed to and teaching to crowds, and he annoys the dickens out of people in authority. Throughout these early chapters of Mark, there's urgency and movement - everything is immediate! Jesus has a conversation with Peter - who do you say that I am? And Peter recognizes him as the Messiah.

Now, that could have been the whole gospel, and if you're Peter, that would be just fine by you. From region to region, following your teacher as he heals, blesses, feeds, and teaches. That's a great story to be part of.

Just before this morning's text, Jesus tells his followers that his conflicts with religious leaders and the Roman government will grow more and more serious but he will not be silenced. To walk in his way means taking up a cross - he tells them for the first time but not the last that his way will lead to a cross.

Then, we get to today's text. This is the context. Jesus is about to take his ministry to Jerusalem - but first, he's going up the mountain. His closest followers are starting to understand the magnitude of their teacher's commitment and faithfulness - but they're not quite clear yet. He takes them up the mountain. It's the mid-point of the story, it's a literal high point, it's a fulcrum. They have been all over the place but when they come down, they will be heading for Jerusalem.

We've all been to hill tops, mountaintops, balconies or rooftops, and looked out over the landscape. This is a big part of what Peter, James and John are invited to do in those moments at the summit of Mt. Hermon. After so many individual events, healings, teachings, conflicts with Pharisees, miracles - moving from one day to the next without pausing to see the big picture - here they are, on the mountain top. With so many different ideas of who Jesus is floating around, on the mountain top they hear and see: Jesus is part of the company of great faith leaders, prophets. Jesus is a

new Exodus; Jesus is a messianic figure like Elijah is understood in Jewish tradition. And, if they have forgotten, Jesus is God's beloved son. 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'

Now, even with the mountaintop perspective they don't quite understand. Jesus says, wait until I've risen to try to explain any of this. Perhaps he says that because even with the balcony view, they don't fully understand. Sure enough just a few stories later the twelve are fighting over who will be greatest and have the most power....just as Jesus is walking, deliberately, toward Jerusalem. Even for Peter, James and John, the mountaintop experience doesn't quite help them interpret. Only time, and only Easter, will help them. There's a way in which they cannot understand the storm while they're in it, and understanding the storm is hard even after it is over.

It is hard to comprehend transformation, change, transfiguration. It's nearly impossible to understand it when you're in the middle of it. And really there are two transfigurations, two major changes happening up on that mountain. First is Jesus transfigured and appearing dazzling and glorious. Second is Jesus shifting focus to Jerusalem and bringing his followers with him, on a path that will require so much sacrifice. Peter has said it - stay safe, stop courting trouble - but Jesus' response is to say, if you're my disciple, pick up your cross. Not to suffer for its own sake, but because Jesus' message of love and justice are worth the sacrifice. Peter would like to stay in place. Human beings often resist change. And even when change is imposed on us (through storm, say, or, through pandemic) we want to return to our original state, we want what both psychologists and church leaders call *homeostasis*. We so often want to return to stability - even when stability is an unjust or painful reality. It's easier to deal with than the unknown. We also have a really hard time comprehending change. Change can feel like a damaging storm, when sometimes it can also be a revelation, and evolution.

As poet Wendell Berry puts it,

“The moment of transformation
the presence of creation,
itself beyond your reach.”

Our desire for stability and homeostasis make these threshold moments traumatic and hard to understand.

In our text this is Peter’s response:
He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

They’re terrified.

Mark is always the most terse of the gospels, so let me just add that in Matthew’s version of the same story, Jesus speaks to Peter, James, and John with words that help: “Get up. Don’t be afraid.” In the midst of the terror of change, and even as he is tightening his sandals for the journey down the mountain to Jerusalem, Jesus ministers to them. Get up. Don’t be afraid.

It seems to me that there’s a pattern for us to follow. Our lives are filled with crisis, change, transformation, and even sometimes transfiguration. From the mountain, we might learn from Peter, James and John:

In the midst of change
Look around
Try to see the full landscape
Don’t be afraid of a path different from the one that led you to the summit
Listen to God
Listen to Jesus
Don’t act too fast...
But don’t stay put either.
Most of all, follow Jesus. He knows where we’re going.

On Wednesday, we will begin Lent. This year I've asked us to take up the theme of Pilgrimage. I'm very aware that in the last year we have all experienced tremendous change - and because we are still in the midst of it, we might not be able to see the big picture. We're in the midst of the fog on the top of the mountain, perhaps in a cloud of unknowing. Nonetheless we're going to go on pilgrimage through the wilderness, as Jesus did. We're also going on Pilgrimage down the mountain and into the next phase of our lives, as followers of Jesus. So, I invite you to do what Peter, James, and John do. We know they are not perfect in their following, but they try:

In the midst of change

Look around

Try to see the full landscape

Don't be afraid of a path different from the one that led you to the summit

Listen to God

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Don't act too fast...

But don't stay put either.

Most of all, follow Jesus. He knows where we're going.

Amen.