

“Only Jesus”

February 14, 2021

Good News for a New Year series – Transfiguration Sunday

Holy Baptism – Livestream

Jesus moves quickly in the Gospel of Mark – or at least Mark moves quickly telling us about Jesus. We’re jumping ahead today from chapter 1. If you’ve been reading along in Mark, from chapter 2 until now, there have been more healings, more disciples called to follow, growing controversy with Jesus’ ministry, more people coming for healing, more teaching, and big moments when Jesus calms the storm at sea, feeds thousands of people, and walks on water.

In the middle of it all, Jesus sends his disciples out to do his work – driving out unclean spirits and preaching repentance. And John the Baptist is killed because he speaks truth to power. Jesus gets into more trouble talking about how religious tradition held so tightly can make it difficult to follow God’s commandments. He has a poignant conversation with a woman who asks him to heal her daughter and another poignant conversation with Peter, who calls Jesus the Christ, but then doesn’t take well to Jesus talking about how he will suffer and die.

It’s in that conversation that Jesus puts a little more teeth on the call to “follow me.” He talks about self-denial and taking up a cross – and following fully without shame. And he promises that they’ll see the Kingdom of God come with power. So that’s where we start today...

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We read the Transfiguration of Jesus just before the season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday - Ash Wednesday. From this point on in Mark’s Gospel, controversy surrounding Jesus grows more intense. Religious leaders get fed up with him; it leads to the cross. We know the rest of the story.

And this amazing moment of glory happens in the middle of Jesus telling the disciples that he will suffer, die, and be raised again. It happens just after Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ and just after Peter is rebuked for questioning the need for Jesus to suffer and die for God’s will to be done.

Transfiguration is a “thin place,” which is a term from Celtic Christianity – a place where heaven and earth meet closely. That happens for me whenever we celebrate baptism – and remember our own. Even if we don’t actually remember it, we remember God’s grace for us. It’s a “thin place” when I get to stand with families who bring children and when adults come to claim God’s grace.

Though it's different not being in person, we're all witnesses to this moment for Shiloh – gift from God – as we claim God's grace in his life, give thanks with his family, and promise to care for them as members of God's family. These "thin places" happen every now and then when we get just a quick glimpse of God's presence, a God moment when grace is unmistakable, or a time when something new is revealed to us that helps us grow in faith.

Transfiguration is a holy moment designed not only to awe the disciples, but also to show and tell them who Jesus is. He is the Messiah – the Christ – God's Anointed One who is the fulfillment of the Law (Moses is there) and the Prophets (Elijah).

I wonder if the disciples expected a quiet retreat – maybe a time to pray with Jesus away from the crowds. But Jesus is transfigured before them – a change in his appearance that absolutely awes them. Peter doesn't know what to say, but tries to speak into this amazing moment – offering to build a shelter for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter wants to capture it – maybe even control it. If he builds something, he can come back and remember this display of Jesus' holiness shining through his humanness.

Truthfully, I'm with Peter. I'd want to stay up on the mountain for as long as I could – no demands, no people rushing Jesus, no one asking for healing, no chaos, and a lot less controversy. It would be great to stay on that mountain for a while without the worries of the world – especially if I had to consider that Jesus is making his way to suffering and death. Yes, Peter, I'd want to stay put and bask in this vision and forget about the rest. But Jesus doesn't stay there.

It's after Peter offers to build the shelters that the voice speaks to the disciples confirming that Jesus is the Son of God – and demands that they listen to him. I wonder if it's a jab at Peter for talking too much – or just a reminder that everything Jesus says comes from God. They should pay attention. And just as quickly as the voice comes, that's it, and all they see is Jesus – only Jesus.

And they don't get to stay on the mountain. The moment is just long enough to be remembered. Just as Jesus led them up, he leads them down – back to the grind, back to the real world where pain and struggle are in their faces, back to where needs are always there.

Jesus is the One who does the work of healing and helping on the ground – hands dirty, engaged, invested. He's fully human and embraces our full humanity. Jesus is the One who shines in full glory so brightly in blinding light that you can't look directly at him. He's the revelation of God with us. He's fully divine. And so, this moment – this "thin place" – reminds us that the One we follow is walking with us in the hard stuff and also reigns over all of it. Only Jesus is worthy of following – and worthy of worship.

Discipleship continues to be demanding. Peter, James, and John must continue to heal and bring new life and hope to people. Jesus will not be glorified without first experiencing the pain of rejection and the reality of death. His mission can't be carried out from the mountaintop, but has to be completed in daily ministry – and ultimately on the cross.

Our faith isn't deepened only from these "thin places" and spiritual highs, though they certainly strengthen our faith. Maybe you have one of those moments when you felt so close to God - just long enough to hold onto. Faith is a gift that is nurtured by the presence of Christ walking with us in the everyday stuff. We're not free from the reality of suffering, but we also don't go it alone. We know pain and grief. We know illness, brokenness, the struggle to love as Jesus loves and forgive as he forgives. Sometimes we experience God's glory and presence at the most difficult times of life – when we face loss, death, need, or sorrow.

My mom sent me a text this week with a picture of her grandmother (my great-grandmother) and some reflection of her life. My great-grandma lost her husband at a young age - and then lost two of her children in the 1970's. How did she deal with all of that loss? It was a song that came on - Because He Lives - that reminded my mom of how her grandmother had a faith foundation that sustained her. So God's glory and presence are with us in the most difficult times of life, too.

Following Jesus isn't about freezing moments in time or trying to capture them forever, but going on in faith and relying on those moments to strengthen us for serving God. Those moments of inspiration from God must be translated into motivation to love and serve God. We need those moments to remember that we can't fully understand or comprehend the glory of God, and yet, we know we want to experience it. We get just enough that we want to cling to it. And when we do, we let it form us and transform us.

So the words that the disciples hear are for us: Listen to him! And it means "active listening" – not just hearing what Jesus says, but actually listening to him, internalizing what he says, and following him in faith. God in Christ who claims us, calls us, cares about us, teaches with authority, heals us, and shines more brightly than anything – listen to him!

Listening means following him closely, learning from him, and continuing his work. Listening means following Jesus' way of love and power – and understanding that following him will take us into places of sacrifice and suffering. It will take us into difficult conversations, looking at ourselves, opening our hearts, seeing who we really are and the struggles that we have - and remembering that we are beloved. Jesus goes to the cross for the sins of the whole world, which the disciples struggle with throughout their time with him.

And though Good News may not seem likely, that's precisely where we claim it – that God would show us grace – and show grace to the whole world – by choosing a path of suffering so that we might have a relationship with God. God reconciles all of humanity to himself in Jesus. The Light of the World who comes for all of the world is the Light of the World who shines brightly even as he goes back to show and tell God's love on the ground.

So, for you and me, the Transfiguration offers an invitation – and a call to hope. We worship only Jesus, and our worship calls us into love and service. We're invited to be invested in the world – in solidarity with humanity and the world God created and loves. We're invited to be engaged with one another – knowing that we're connected as beloved in God's sight. We're called to work in the world, bringing hope and healing, bringing justice and freedom – not for our own benefit or glory – but for only Jesus.

We're also offered this moment of hope – that this same Jesus who shines in glory will lead us into glory. He is with us and he is God with us. He walks with us and will not leave us even in the most difficult times. That's what my mom realized when she saw those pictures of her grandmother and remembered her story. We have hope when we keep our focus on him as he guides and directs us, loves and redeems us, and supports and strengthens us.

We need the reminder of who Jesus is because Lent is a time to remind ourselves of our desperate need for him. We begin this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, with an opportunity to claim our mortality – *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return*. We need that time, but we also need this reminder of the glory of Jesus because that is our hope for our future with God – that the One who shines in glory – only Jesus - will lead us there. We will experience the fullness of God's glory at the end of this earthly life. We need to remember who Jesus is as we prepare to focus on spiritual disciplines, to open our hearts to be transformed.

As they came down from the mountain, Jesus told Peter, James and John not to talk about what they had seen there. That's strange perhaps. Though they knew Jesus was God's Son, they heard the voice, they did not yet know what being God's Son meant. They had heard him say it, but it was difficult to comprehend because it was so much different than what they expected.

Friends, we're on the other side of the story. We do know what it means that Jesus is Messiah, Son of God. And it is Good News - to share. Only Jesus – that's where we focus. When we keep our focus on him, other things fall into place - not always easily - but he walks with us in great joy and glory - and when we go back down the mountain, in our moments of struggle.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...