

Sunday February 11th, 2024
Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9
“Left Speechless”

I read about a terrible accident recently. A truck loaded with thousands of copies of Roget's Thesaurus crashed yesterday losing its entire load. Witnesses were stunned, startled, aghast, taken aback, stupefied, confused, shocked, rattled, paralyzed, dazed, bewildered, mixed up, surprised, awed, dumbfounded, nonplussed, flabbergasted, astounded, amazed, confounded, astonished, overwhelmed, horrified, numbed, flummoxed, speechless, perplexed, and gobsmacked. Meanwhile, those waiting for the shipment were at a loss for words.

A loss for words. Personally, I like the word gobsmacked to describe when we have nothing to say in response to something we have heard or seen. When was the last time we were truly gobsmacked by anything. Anything at all. I am sure that all of us have had such moments but honestly, most of the time our lives fall into routine, and we rarely are surprised. Dare I even suggest that for many of us, boredom best describes our existence.

I wonder every time I encounter the transfiguration story, about when was the last time, like the four disciples, I was left gobsmacked by an encounter with God. Take even this morning. We enter this house of worship with some expectations about what we will hear, see, and experience. In fact, we may become rather upset if anything disrupts what we consider the well-ordered nature of a worship experience.

And when I am referring to disruptions to a well-ordered worship service, I am not referring to an incident I had with a “friend” of mine as he was walking out of a church service, and I noticed he had two black eyes. I asked what happened. “Well”, he said, “I was sitting behind Mrs. Brown, you know, the large woman with all those grandkids; the one that always dresses real fancy. Well, I noticed her dress had accidentally got tucked in, well, you know... her back side, between her cheeks. So, I pulled it out and she punched me.” “How did you get the second black eye?” “Well, I figured if that made her so upset, I'd better try and put it back.”

Are our times together as a community of faith or even on our own to be without a sense of awe. Should we ever be gobsmacked in God’s presence? I think it is a sad situation. I say this because every time we gather for worship (these days, whether in person or on a screen), are we supposed to be the disciples on the mountain seeing the rabbi—the carpenter from Nazareth who became our teacher—bathed in light? I mean what happens on that mountain, is life altering for the disciples.

When was the last time we were altered by our worship experience? Considering again the ancient story, it seems at first that, Jesus and Peter, James, and John are out for a hike. A high mountain: the sort of place eager mountaineers might yearn to scale for the vista. It is very doubtful the three disciples knew what was coming. Pausing on a flatter piece of ground. Suddenly, everything changes.

What does this experience show us? The vision, the disciples behold, removes the veil of Jesus’ humanness to reveal his divinity: wondrous, frightening, powerful, unexpected, and rich, connecting all ages (the prophets Elijah and Moses with Jesus), giving enlightenment.

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His external appearance is utterly changed. Jesus' transfiguration is not to be approached with the assumption that we can understand it because we cannot. We are not to parse it with our limited theology, but rather to experience it. Bathe in it.

The church preserved this story as a means to draw us in toward what is abnormal, unnatural—like the burning fire that does not consume the bush (Moses' first encounter with YHWH in Exodus 3:1-6) and like the fire Elijah hoped for and received from God on the altar drenched in water to win the wager against the prophets of Baal (Elijah's story in 1 Kings 18). The Transfiguration places Jesus in the lineage and honor of the two prophets who stand beside him on the mountain.

The disciples are terrified in a way that means they fear they will be harmed (see Ezekiel 34:28). Yet, they seek for a way to remain in the presence of what terrifies them. The drama of the moment suggests that it harbors danger. They are gobsmacked.

And then if this wasn't enough revelation, a cloud appears as another manifestation of the divine, with the voice that reminds us of the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism in Mark 1:11. Here, however, the voice does not speak in the second person to Jesus ("You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased") but in the third person to the disciples ("This is my Son ... listen to him").

The Transfiguration gives the disciples the experience of witnessing a most amazing and unspeakable vision that draws them to want to stay there, dwell in that place of wonder, and then to be told by the voice of the divine that their job is not to abide in that wonder, but to go back down the mountain. The voice in the cloud is directed at the disciples, to the church, rather than to the Son as it was at his baptism. It speaks to Jesus' identity so that the church can see what Jesus alone heard when he was baptized.

Just a little clarification. We might use the words "transfigure" and "transform" interchangeably, but there is a helpful distinction to keep in mind. To be transfigured is to be changed in outward form or appearance. Jesus' transfiguration does not alter who he is but gives to those who see the changed visage a new understanding of him because they see him outwardly in a different light.

When we speak of transformation, we tend to mean a complete or essential change in composition or structure. Jesus on the mountain with Moses and Elijah is not transformed (changed inwardly) but transfigured before his disciples (shown to be other than assumed). He is not made to have a new essential self but an appearance that conveys his standing in the company of Israel's greatest prophets.

The Transfiguration story is a reminder that our worship, week after week, as we go through the Word of God, is that our vision is restored. We are enabled by God to see Jesus as Saviour (something more than a teacher of morality and ethics) because the dazzling clothes constitute an epiphany. His transfiguration transforms the disciples in the story and transforms us by removing the veil over our vision. I find myself significantly convicted by the transfiguration story because it reminds me, in fact all of us, that faith is not to be reduced to an intellectual exercise.

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Peter Enns' book, "The Sin of Certainty" arrived a few days ago and I am seeing the folly of much of our spirituality that we promote, as the business of the church. For the entirety of the Protestant religious experience, we have defaulted to the idea that all our problems, moral or otherwise, all our dilemmas, can be solved by simply knowing things from the bible or from preachers.

I see now that much of my religious experience, and religious activity is based on accumulating knowledge, and disseminating knowledge. Now don't get me wrong. It is a very good thing to know things about the bible, God, and the church. However, knowledge can only take us so far. God does not call us to know things, but rather to trust him. To know him. To experience him. Sometimes knowledge can get in the way of what God is trying to tell us.

On the mountain top, gobsmacked by what they saw, the disciples first instinct coming out of their terror was to understand what they saw, and in Peter's case to commemorate their experience with a series of pillars. We read the story and what is the first thing we wish to do? Understand it. Place it in its rightful place in the theology of the bible and the church. We read and meditate on this passage and want to gain knowledge from it.

The disciples missed the point. We are in grave danger of missing the point. Yes, there is a lesson presented here, "This is my son, listen to him". But the trip up the mountain is not a continuing ed seminar for the three disciples. It is a revelation. A revealing of Jesus' true image. I admit that it is tempting to think that if I could just know more. Just find that little nugget that would unlock the bible for me, everything would fall into place.

I'd have my stone pillar to mark the moment when I finally "got it". But its not about getting there. It's about being Jesus. Its about being transformed so I can look like the transfigured Jesus. 2 Corinthians 3:18 holds a promise that "all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image..."

Why is this counterbalance so important. Well, I think that pervasive in the church and its teaching is a dishonesty. All of us, at some point in our lives reaches a crisis point of some kind. A time when life throws a curve ball that there is no way we are going to knock away. In these moments we enter the dark night of the soul. So, what are we to do? This is where the church often fails us.

The default advice is for us to know more. Read our bibles more. Pray more positively. Really? Psalm 88 from Eugene Petersen's The Message Bible.

1-9 GOD, you're my last chance of the day.
I spend the night on my knees before you.
Put me on your salvation agenda;
take notes on the trouble I'm in.
I've had my fill of trouble;
I'm camped on the edge of hell.
I'm written off as a lost cause,
one more statistic, a hopeless case.

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Abandoned as already dead,
one more body in a stack of corpses,
And not so much as a gravestone—
I'm a black hole in oblivion.
You've dropped me into a bottomless pit,
sunk me in a pitch-black abyss.
I'm battered senseless by your rage,
relentlessly pounded by your waves of anger.
You turned my friends against me,
made me horrible to them.
I'm caught in a maze and can't find my way out,
blinded by tears of pain and frustration.

⁹⁻¹² I call to you, GOD; all day I call.
I wring my hands, I plead for help.
Are the dead a live audience for your miracles?
Do ghosts ever join the choirs that praise you?
Does your love make any difference in a graveyard?
Is your faithful presence noticed in the corridors of hell?
Are your marvelous wonders ever seen in the dark,
your righteous ways noticed in the Land of No Memory?
¹³⁻¹⁸ I'm standing my ground, GOD, shouting for help,
at my prayers every morning, on my knees each daybreak.
Why, GOD, do you turn a deaf ear?
Why do you make yourself scarce?
For as long as I remember I've been hurting;
I've taken the worst you can hand out, and I've had it.
Your wildfire anger has blazed through my life;
I'm bleeding, black-and-blue.
You've attacked me fiercely from every side,
raining down blows till I'm nearly dead.
You made lover and neighbor alike dump me;
the only friend I have left is Darkness.

That's in the bible? Yes, it is and others like it. Knowledge really doesn't help us in a place describe in the Psalm I read.

The Transfiguration stands between the time after Pentecost, when we are learning to be church, and Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday, when we are thrust back into the hard truth that we are dust.

The power of the Transfiguration is that it plants in our hearts and minds the brilliance of eternity on the mountain with the greatest prophets, emboldening us for the journey together as the body of Christ. The Transfiguration thus prepares us to come to terms with our humility, our nature, our utter dependence on God.

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It is no small matter that the scene ends with the word “dead.” Jesus has embraced his identity as one who will die and be raised. He signals the journey ahead that will be coming when he and his disciples have left the mountain. It is one thing to have had a “high” experience, “a mountaintop” experience with Jesus up in the clouds where everything is brilliant, but it is not the be-all-and-end-all.

The reason for the identification of Jesus with Moses and Elijah is for the church, the disciples, to realize their crucial work in the world is to accompany Jesus to the cross, to take up our crosses, to die to live, to be last to be first, to refuse the invitation to turn away from God’s laws.

The church has a responsibility: to listen to God’s Son. That listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure, and the view is stunning. The church must listen to the voice of God’s Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross. We are not called to have power over others, to know more than others, but to rise as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and give life to others, especially those who find themselves in Psalm 88.