

Last Sunday of Epiphany, Yr. B
February 11, 2018
Mark 9:2-9

A large part of Mark's gospel has to do with two questions: who is Jesus? And what does it mean to be a disciple? A word about context is helpful before we look at the story of the transfiguration. First of all, this comes right in the middle of the Gospel and we hear similar things at the beginning, at Jesus' Baptism, when God says, "This is my beloved son;" and then here, where we hear that again, along with the admonition to listen to him, and then at the end, when the centurion, at Jesus' death says, "Truly, this was the Son of God." So, beginning, middle and end, all with Jesus being identified as the Son of God. That's the larger context, but closer in, and having more to do with what it means to be a disciple, this story is in a section that begins and ends with blindness. The first occurs a number of verses back and is the story of Jesus trying to heal a blind man. He takes some mud and puts it on the man's eyes, but the "miracle" doesn't really work at first. When he asks the fellow if he can see, the response is, "Well, sort of. I can see people but they look like trees moving around." So Jesus repeats the action and then the man can see clearly. The second healing occurs a few passages after the Transfiguration. In that passage a man who is physically blind, but who has spiritual understanding, is healed of his blindness. When he is, the text says that he gets up and follows Jesus in the way. And in the middle are the blind disciples, struggling to see, to understand.

So, who is this Jesus? Shortly before we come in on this scene, Jesus has asked the disciples, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? You'll remember that Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah and he gets a word of approval from Jesus. But then Jesus says that they're going to Jerusalem and he's going to be rejected, suffer and die, and then he'll be resurrected. Peter misses the last part, about the resurrection, and only hears that first part, the part about suffering and death and he jumps in and says NO WAY – THAT WILL NEVER HAPPEN! And then he hears words of rebuke instead of approval. Peter gets it partly right – he gets the title, but he doesn't get what it means to be a Messiah. His world view, which was shared by the other disciples, was that the Messiah was going to be a worldly king, full of military power, who would rout the enemies of Israel. Sorry, says Jesus, you've got it all wrong. I'm about a whole different kind of power – the power of love and self-sacrifice.

Some time ago, Thomas Kuhn wrote a book called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It was kind of a breakthrough book in the scientific world. In that book he talked about how new knowledge enables what he called paradigm shifts – new knowledge can bring about a whole different way of understanding reality. He says that a society will have one paradigm which will pretty much explain things. When things that don't fit that explanation come along, we just sort of sweep them under the rug. Eventually, however, there's so much under the rug that there's more unexplained than explained – and often at that point, a new paradigm is born.

I think something like that must have been going on the Peter, James and John. They had a paradigm, an explanation of what was going on with Jesus. They'd seen him exorcise demons and heal people, they'd heard him preach and teach and, as I just mentioned, they had heard Peter call Jesus the Messiah. And they had a paradigm for what that meant. So when they saw

the Pharisees arguing with Jesus or found out that the authorities were plotting against him, or that his own family thought he had lost it, that all could still fit under the rug. But when Jesus told them he was going to suffer and die, the paradigm no longer worked.

So now we see the disciples going with Jesus to the top of a mountain. And there they see him transfigured, they see him conversing with Moses and Elijah, they hear God naming him as his son. At the very least, what this is is a new piece of knowledge, one that completely upsets the paradigm under which they had been operating. One way of talking about this is to say that they see through a veil to the deepest reality. We can sympathize with Peter as he stutters something about constructing three dwelling places there on the mountain. Most commentators think that Peter is just blurting something out- just saying whatever comes to mind in this incredible situation. But Greek scholars point out that the word Peter uses for “dwelling”, sometimes translated as “tents,” is the same word that John uses in the beginning of his Gospel when he talks about Jesus coming to dwell with us in the Incarnation – the word can be translated as tabernacle. Like the Ark of the Covenant or the tabernacle used to “contain” the presence of God before the Temple was built, the word means that somehow the presence of God has come and STAYED with the people. So, in John, the text would read, “...the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Stayed with us, dwelt with us, blessed us with his presence. And you can’t blame Peter for wanting that. That’s what we all want. But they didn’t stay there on the mountain. The very next passage has them going down the mountain and coming upon a crisis where the other disciples have tried to heal a boy with something that sounds like epilepsy and are unable to do so – Jesus heals the boy, but the disciples, it seems, have gone from the mountaintop to the valley.

What can we take away from this scripture? At least two things, it seems to me.

First of all, our spiritual journeys, our own coming to understanding about who Jesus is in our lives and about what it means to be a disciples, are gradual. There are times when God’s presence is visible to us and, since the Kingdom is already here and now, there will be times when the light of the Kingdom will shine out in the midst of the mundane and we’ll get a glimpse of God’s presence and glory. I remember telling you about our trip to Israel when we spent days filled to the brim with information without much sense of presence, but then also, that Eucharist on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, elevating the bread and wine up toward the star-filled sky. A glimpse of presence, a glimpse of glory.

There’s something else, too. Like the disciples, we’d like to just have those mountain top experiences all the time, one after another. But they had to go back down, down to do all the work, all the healing and preaching and serving that was implied in that experience on the top of the mountain. We too have that vision, but it’s given, not for our edification, but so that we can gradually come to see God’s presence everywhere – come to see that we live in a God-soaked universe and to then live according to that vision and understanding.

There’s another thing – we have to be looking. We need to pray for that deeper vision that will allow us to see the light of God that’s in all creation. Remember Thomas Merton writing about SEEING, truly seeing the people in Louisville, Kentucky one day and being stunned with the realization that, because of the Incarnation, which meant that God was everywhere, all those

people were walking around shining like the sun. I remember reading in one of the Forward books about a woman driving somewhere with her 4-yr. old son in the back seat, happily sucking his thumb. They drove past a hitchhiker holding out a sign with his destination, but they didn't stop. As they went by, the little guy called out, "Sorry, Jesus." His mother wondered how it is that he can see what she misses and goes on to talk about seeing Jesus in the poor and homeless and oppressed. When I read it, I thought, yes, that's right, but even that doesn't go far enough, because Jesus, as God, is everywhere, in everyone, in each of us, in each thing that's been created, because it all participates in the life of God.

Teilhard de Chardin, the French paleontologist and Jesuit once said:

"Throughout my life, by means of my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight until, aflame all around me, it has become almost completely luminous from within...such has been my experience in contact with the earth – the diaphony of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire...Christ; his heart; a fire capable of penetrating everywhere and gradually, spreading everywhere."

Let me close with a story about how that vision can spread. It comes from the clergy retreat we had this past week. One of the priests told about how she became really sick while in seminary, so sick that she ended up in the hospital for months. While she was there, some of her classmates came to the hospital to pray with and for her. There were 16 of them, she said. They asked the unit nurse if they could go in and pray and she said that it couldn't do any harm at that point. So they did. In a later conversation that the nurse had after the priest had recovered and the unit nurse came to see her, the nurse said that she got to thinking that if she were in a similar situation, there wouldn't be 16 people who would pray for her. That thought and the self-reflection that followed ended up with her going back to church – a new experience, new knowledge and understanding, a paradigm shift and a move closer to the heart of God.

It's the journey we're all on, back to the deepest desire of our hearts. It's a journey that will include mountain tops and valleys. Because the purpose of the journey is to transform us, to change us, to make us those disciples that are walking in the footsteps of Jesus. And as we walk those life journeys, we can trust that God has designed the perfect path for each of us. Amen.