



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 11, 2024

2 KINGS 2:1-12; PSALM 50:1-6; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:3-6; MARK 9:2-9

Transfiguration Now

Mark 9:2-9 [*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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. 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.*]

Today is the last Sunday in the season after Epiphany, which begins each year with the story of Jesus’s baptism and ends with the story of Jesus’s transfiguration. It’s a strange story, and an important one—it’s told in every Gospel except John’s, and it even has its own feast day, August 6. The Transfiguration is the story that bridges the Incarnation and the Crucifixion and Resurrection, which is why we hear it just before Lent, which begins on Wednesday.

First though, I want to tell you this: Mark is my favorite gospel. I fell in love with it at age sixteen, when my stepmother took me to see Sir Alec McCowen perform the Gospel of Mark **in** its entirety as a one-man show on a nearly bare stage at the Westwood Playhouse in Los Angeles. I was

riveted. He used the King James version from 1611 as befits a great Shakespearean actor, though after an early performance a woman stopped him to ask if he’d written it, and someone else asked where he could find the script.

What appealed to Sir Alec about Mark’s gospel is partly what appeals to me—it’s vivid and verb-driven, meant to be told aloud as it originally was—you can hear the echoes of its origins in the oral tradition in all the times Mark uses “and” and “immediately”! We may think at first hearing that this gospel is rough, even untidy in how it’s put together—but it’s carefully constructed.

The narrative gallops along at an exciting pace. Just like the disciples, we have to race to keep up with Jesus as he runs from village to village—until we get to the third act, the events of Holy Week. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the pace slows down, so much so that by Good Friday, we get hourly updates of Jesus on the cross.

Mark's Jesus is a man of action. He meets people where they are and addresses their practical needs as well as their spiritual ones. He casts out demons, heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, feeds the hungry, challenges the powerful, walks on water, raises the dead.

For all the miracles, this gospel is rich with details of everyday life and ordinary people. Jesus's humanity is also in full view: we see him cranky, tired, fierce, furious, tender, teasing, unpredictable.

The dramatic arc of the story relies on the mystery of who Jesus is and what he came to do as well as on the continual failure of his disciples to recognize and understand this, which is in part why it remains so fresh and relevant to us today. We are right there with them: baffled, confused, hesitant to accept what he's doing and saying, still intrigued, wondering what he'll do and say next, right up until the Gospel's end. Hang on—we're not there yet!

Scholars believe Mark was written about thirty to forty years after the crucifixion and resurrection, at a time of great social, political, and religious unrest, probably during or shortly after the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 CE, which

culminated in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Against this backdrop of violence and fear, Mark was written in Greek for a largely Gentile audience, and perhaps for Jewish refugees in Rome. Early Christian tradition has it that Mark was Peter's translator, and this Gospel is Peter's account.

On Epiphany, we remember Jesus being recognized as king, God, and human in gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh by the magi, the wise ones from the East. In Mark's Gospel we skip Jesus's infancy and childhood all together, and jump right in. Listen—we heard these words on January 7th:

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's son . . .”

When a story starts with “Once upon a time,” we know what's coming next—or at least we think we do. Mark's listeners knew that good news proclaimed this way was hardly ever good news for them. This was how the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, supposed son of the golden god Apollo, announced the coming of his kingdom, a gospel of justice and peace through military force and oppression. Mark chooses these provocative words deliberately, to describe the coming of a new and very different kingdom and king.

I want you to hear this line from that first chapter of Mark, when Jesus was baptized. The translation I'm using today is The Common English Bible. “While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and

the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.'"

Full of the knowledge of his belovedness, Jesus sets out—first into the wilderness and then into the world. Mark says, "Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news. 'Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives and *trust* this good news!'" These are the first words Jesus speaks, and his work begins.

By the time we reach today's Gospel, Peter has finally recognized and named Jesus as the Messiah, God's anointed one. Then Jesus confounds him and the other disciples by telling them that he will suffer, be killed, and rise from the dead. Peter is horrified. That's not how it's supposed to work. The Messiah, the promised and longed-for king, is supposed to save God's people in power and might, physically and tactically overcoming the Roman empire, establishing an actual kingdom of peace, justice, and prosperity. How could *this* possibly be good news for anyone? In consolation, Jesus says to the stricken disciples in the first sentence of Chapter 9, just before our reading begins, "I assure you that some standing here won't die until they see God's kingdom arrive in power."

That is another thing I want you to notice about the Gospel of Mark: Over and over again, Jesus offers glimpses of the kingdom of God, the ways in which God's justice, mercy, and truth are breaking into the world. What Jesus teaches in

sayings and parables, he also embodies by doing the work of bringing about the kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." As the Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine puts it,

For Mark, the kingdom had come, is coming, and will come with power. It had already come, powerfully, in the healings and exorcisms. It comes when human beings clean up their moral impurity. We can see that the kingdom has come, in power, when people act in compassion rather than selfishness, in generosity rather than greed. The kingdom has come when people who claim to be disciples act the part. The kingdom has come when people of good will wrestle with difficult texts. The kingdom has come when we repent of our mistakes and resolve to do better next time. And sometimes, the kingdom has come when we experience something unbelievable, incredible, ineffable.

(The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner's Guide to the Good News, p.57)

Six days after that upsetting talk about resurrection and crucifixion, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a high mountain. Before their very eyes, Jesus is transformed. Mark doesn't use the word transfiguration, but the Greek *metamorphosis*, associated with stories of the gods manifesting their divine radiance to humans on earth. Two great prophets of ancient Israel appear and talk with Jesus, Elijah, and

Moses, who themselves had intimate and transformative experiences with God on mountaintops. Peter anxiously, awkwardly suggests setting up three tents for them. Mark tells us Peter said this “because he didn’t know how to respond for the three of them were terrified.” Can you blame him?

Now you’ll hear the echo from Jesus’s baptism: “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, ‘This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!’” Notice, it’s not “Look at him!” The command is to listen. Mark continues, “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead.” There are more hard words and days ahead.

Why does this strange story matter? What difference does this metamorphosis make? For a fleeting moment, Peter, James, and John see God’s kingdom come in power and glory on the person of Jesus. Heaven and earth are joined together. Jesus is clothed in belovedness. As the story turns towards the cross, the disciples can carry the light of this moment with them, letting it illuminate the darkness they encounter, reminding them that there’s something more, something beyond their imagining, even when it

seems like the story has come to its devastating conclusion.

Mark’s Gospel ends even more strangely than it begins, with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome fleeing in terror from the empty tomb. Although a man in white tells them that Jesus has been raised and instructs them to go and tell his disciples, especially Peter, Mark concludes, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” We know now that eventually the disciples—Peter, James and John, Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome—told their story, and others listened. There *is* good news in the story of a crucified and risen Messiah, because it means that anything can be transformed, even death. Like Peter, James, and John, we see a glimmer of this promise in the Transfiguration. God’s love changes everything. God’s love changes us. God’s glory shines in you. As we approach Lent, may we, too, follow Jesus by the light of the Transfiguration. May we be transformed by God’s love, so that we can participate in the transforming work that Jesus calls us to. The kingdom comes as God’s will is done, right here, today. *Amen.*