



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 14, 2021
2 KINGS 2:1-12; PSALM 50:1-6; MARK 9:2-9

SHINING LIKE THE SUN

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.]*

When my daughter Ellie was a senior in high school, she played one of the lead roles in the class play. It was set in Cambridge, England in 1896 and centered on women's struggle to be granted an official university degree when they completed the same courses as men. I knew very little about the play in advance, except that Ellie said her character was just like her. But on opening night I didn't really know what to expect.

The show began as three young women in tailored Victorian dress stepped onstage,

bantering about their studies and upcoming bicycle-riding lessons. As other actors joined the scene, I was captivated by the young women's poise and dignity and delighted by the one who takes charge of a large antique bicycle and rides around the stage. After about 10 minutes, though, I was confused, because Ellie hadn't appeared. I whispered to my friend, "Where's Ellie? I don't see her." She looked at me oddly and said, "Jen, she's the one on the bicycle."

I didn't recognize my own daughter. It could have been the English accent, but I think something else made me slow to see how naturally she inhabited this brave, autonomous character. I had some updating to do. And that moment has become a touchstone for me – a small, but real-life experience of how we can miss the fullness of another person.

Every year on the last Sunday before Lent, we hear the gospel story of the transfiguration. It is a tipping point in Mark's gospel, right after Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to his followers. The disciples shut that conversation down quickly only to be told that those who want to follow Jesus must take up their own cross. So, six days after that sobering conversation, Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. When they arrive at the top, something happens.

The gospel is told from the disciples' point of view and you can imagine them recounting it later: "So, we got to the summit and like that (snap!) Jesus was someone else. He was so dazzling you could barely see him, and then Moses and Elijah showed up and they all talked like old friends. It was

terrifying! And then a loud voice spoke out of a towering cloud, 'This is my beloved son, pay attention!' And like that (snap!), Jesus was back to normal. Unbelievable."

This story of Jesus' transfiguration resonates with the stories of Moses and Elijah, prophets who also climb mountains and are transformed by their encounters with God. So early Christians who knew the Jewish tradition would have heard Mark's gospel and understood Jesus as a witness to God's *glory*, which means a witness to God's *presence*, sometimes appearing in scripture as blinding light or howling wind, for example.

But Jesus' transfiguration declares much more. On that mountain top, Jesus is revealed not only as God's beloved, but also as the one in whom God is completely manifest. So completely, in fact, that God's glory is Jesus' glory, too. God's presence and Jesus' presence are one and the same.

As Christianity has unpacked this story over the centuries, we have developed language for this ineffable event. It is a theophany, God appearing to humans. It demonstrates incarnation, that God becomes flesh in Jesus and lives among us. It foreshadows

resurrection, the fulness of Christ's glory revealed only after his death on the cross. But for the disciples, there were no words. Only awe and fear.

Their fear is understandable – it appears their rabbi and friend has entered another realm to commune with the holiest of prophets; he is transformed before their eyes. The way the disciples recount it, they are passive observers of what is happening to someone else. But I wonder if that is the full story.

What if Jesus has been reflecting God's glory all along but only now can the disciples perceive it? What if they have been traveling together, listening to familiar Jesus teach about scripture and the prophets and the good news of a loving God, but all the while – not yet visible to his followers – Jesus abides in a dazzling divine light alongside Elijah and Moses? What if this is not a new thing for Jesus so much as it is for the disciples?

In other words, what if the full story of Jesus' transfiguration includes the transfiguration of the disciples, too? Their mental constraints loosen and their vision and understanding of the divine expand so they

can finally perceive that Jesus and God are One. And that God is not separate from them, but in close relationship. Pay attention, indeed!

But here's the thing. If this story is about the disciples' spiritual transfiguration, it is about ours, too. We prayed for just that in the opening collect today. "O God, grant that we may see the light of Jesus' face, which is your light. Make us steadfast in following him so that we become like him, bearing witness to God's presence in others and a locus of that presence in this world."

That's what the spiritual journey always points toward; it is the grounding hope for all we do together as a community of faith. We desire to participate in God's healing of the world by our own transfiguration into the mind, heart and very life of Christ. The word for that is divinization. Today we celebrate Jesus' transfiguration and pray for the divinization of all people.

A real-life example of this comes from Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk. He writes in his journal about an every-day encounter:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of [the people] in which God...

became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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