

Mark 9:2-9

Ah, Transfiguration Sunday. The Gospel reading for the last Sunday before Lent begins is always the episode of what we call the Transfiguration. It is one of the few stories outside of the Crucifixion that is found in all four Gospels. This being Year B, our reading comes from Mark. Mark, being Mark, gives us just the bare bones.

Not a bad choice, though. How much editorializing can one do about this kind of event? Even Peter, who was there, had trouble putting the experience into words. "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified," we are told. Jesus invites the inner circle of the inner circle up on a mountain to pray with him. Suddenly he gets all shiny, and Moses and Elijah show up. Scripture does not say how they knew that the two people were Moses and Elijah. I suppose Jesus told them later. Scripture also does not tell us if they were shiny, too. I'm also not sure why they had to come down in person to talk with Jesus. One would think they could communicate more directly with Jesus.

But then, I don't believe that the point of the Transfiguration was for them to consult with Jesus. We are told that Jesus often went away by himself to pray. This time, he specifically asked Peter, James, and John to go with him. The Transfiguration was for their benefit, not our Lord's. Since the Feast of Epiphany, we have been making our way through the first chapter of Mark with one side trip into John. Last week – you all were in church last week, weren't you? Some of you took advantage of my absence, didn't you? At any rate, last week Jesus began his healing ministry in earnest with Peter's mother-in-law. Now we have skipped ahead to chapter nine.

During that time, Jesus has healed people and fed the multitudes – twice – calmed a storm, raised a young girl from the dead, told parables, cast out demons, and other things that show his authority. The disciples are starting to come around to understanding just who Jesus is. Just before the Transfiguration, we had the scene we call the Confession of Peter, when Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. From then on, Jesus began to tell the disciples about how he must be betrayed and killed. The whole, "Get behind me, Satan," bit.

Now we have this. Peter, James, and John get a glimpse at Jesus' true glory. They see him in the company of Moses, the Law-giver, and Elijah, mightiest of the prophets. The Law and the prophets make up the bulk of Jewish Scripture, so in these two we have the embodiment of Judaism. And they are on a first name basis with Jesus. If Jesus has their blessing, then he must be doing what God wants, even if it doesn't quite make sense to the disciples, yet.

The Transfiguration marks a turning point in Jesus' ministry. The gospel of Luke says that after this event, Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem. The story is moving towards Holy Week and the Crucifixion. That is why we read this passage before Lent. We, too, are preparing for Holy Week. This Wednesday, we will begin our Lenten observance. It is good to take time to examine our lives in the light of Jesus Christ. It is good to try to simplify our lives by forgoing certain pleasures and taking

on certain disciplines that allow us to focus on our Lord and his call. It is good to deny ourselves so that we are reminded of how much we truly have. There is, perhaps, a temptation to see ourselves in the experience of Peter, James, and John. I have heard sermons talking about when we have mountain-top experiences and, like Peter, want to set up a homestead there instead of going into the valley to face the rest of life. That is perhaps not the right lesson here. What James and the rest encountered was not wonderful, but terrifying. While we might think that we would be excited to see Jesus in his radiant glory; that is after two thousand years of Christianity. In the moment, we would have been as dumbstruck as Peter. This is not a story about how to respond to glory. It is a story about seeing Jesus for who he is.

Again, two thousand years of the Church, not to mention probably decades in our own lives, have somewhat inured us to the awesome reality of who Jesus was. What Peter and the boys experienced was not just a mountain top experience, but the revelation of Jesus Christ. We tend to be so blithe about saying that Jesus was the Son of God that we forget the monumental import of that idea. It took the Church until the Fifth Century to really come to terms with the concept, after all. We can understand why the first disciples might have taken some time to come around. They had a couple of millennia of tradition telling you that there is only one God even when God himself is making the revelation of something new, it can be hard to change one's mind about things.

The lesson of the Transfiguration is not how to deal with mountain tops and valleys; it is how to deal with the revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God incarnate; man divine. It is a realization that takes some time to process, and if it doesn't, we haven't really understood the implications. Neils Bohr, a famous physicist, is quoted as saying, "If quantum mechanics hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it yet." The same may be said of the Incarnation.

Because of his overwhelming love for us, God, the Creator of all things, seen and unseen, deigned to become one of his creations. Not to fix some plan gone wrong, but to fulfill his divine design. God created us to be able to choose to want to be part of his divinity. But it needed to be a choice of our free will, not coerced. We are free to choose to love our God, or not. In Jesus Christ, the final part of the plan comes together. God becomes man so that we might become part of God. Christianity isn't about following a set of divine rules- lots of religions do that. Christianity is about coming to the profound understanding that God loves us enough to become one of us and then living our lives in response to that understanding.

Lent is when we take an honest assessment of just how far from that mark we are. Before we have Easter, we must have Lent. Before we can celebrate our Lord's resurrection into eternal life that foreshadows our own resurrection at the last day, we must take time to understand with what price that gift was bought for us. And before we can do that, before we can have Lent. We must try to come

to terms, at least as close as we mere mortals can, with the idea of the Incarnation, with the idea of God made man.

What did Peter, James, and John experience on that mountain top? Human words and ideas are too puny to even try to grasp it. Understanding it isn't what is required. What we should strive to achieve is the awe and wonder that truth revealed to those men inspired in them. In many ways, it is harder for us. Not because it is a new thought, but such an old one. They didn't understand because it was so new. May we not be tempted misunderstand because it is so old that we fool ourselves into thinking that we really do understand all about God. Let us strive for wonder and awe in our contemplation of what god has done. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.