

SERMON
Mark 9:2-9
February 22, 2009 -- Transfiguration Sunday
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When I sat down to start working on this week's Gospel story, I realized what a strange text it is – as I was starting to think about it, Pastor Campbell warned me, “It's a tricky one. A lot of people don't really know quite what to make of the glowing Rabbi.” It's true: a lot of us don't know what to make of it, and what's more, for those of us who like to talk mostly about Jesus' ministry to the most vulnerable people in society, it doesn't offer us familiar ground. Jesus takes the inner circle of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, up to a mountaintop, away from the crowds where he has been teaching and healing, and has started predicting his own death and resurrection. Suddenly, something about him changes – he is “transfigured.” That word, transfigured, doesn't give me a clear mental picture, but scholars say that it seems to mean that his divinity is shining through, that it's clear to anyone looking at him that he is God in human form. His clothes become dazzling white, which must have seemed pretty spectacular in the days before Tide and Clorox, but now sounds a lot like a laundry detergent commercial. Moses and Elijah, two of the great figures of the Old Testament appear, and begin to talk with Jesus. The bewildered disciples don't know what to say, until good old Peter blurts out: “How about I make some tents?” Before Jesus answers, the voice of God booms from heaven: “This is my Son the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!” And just as suddenly as it started, the whole scene is over; Moses and Elijah vanish, and Jesus and the disciples start to descend the mountain. As they walk, Jesus tells them not

to tell this story until he has died and been raised from the dead. It's a strange story, and it can be hard to see the point of this miracle narrative – a brief flash of glory, shown only to a few disciples, who are not even supposed to tell anyone about it. No one is healed, no one is fed, we don't even find out anything new, since Jesus has already told Peter that he is the Messiah.

But there's something going on here that I hadn't realized until I studied it over the past weeks. I didn't see it until I read an observation from some Bible scholars: in the gospel of Mark, this story is deeply connected to the Easter story – it gives us and the disciples a promise that the resurrection is coming, and a glimpse of the glory of Easter. In fact, Mark only barely tells the story of Easter. He doesn't tell the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples, he doesn't tell the story of the road to Emmaus, and he doesn't have the ascension story. Mark's Gospel ends like this: the women come to the tomb; a strange man tells them that Jesus Christ has been raised; they run away terrified, and tell no one. This was so bizarre to early Christians that years later, someone wrote a little summary of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection, and put it at the end of Mark. But it's not that Mark neglected the Easter story; it's not that he didn't think it was important. Instead, he fills this story of Jesus' transfiguration with so much glory, and so much promise, that at the very end all Mark has to do is hint at the resurrection that Jesus promises here, to bring all of the majesty and awe of the transfiguration rushing back.

In fact, we have to learn to hear this story the way early Christians might have heard it in order to even perceive all of the glory that Mark fills it with. You see, in Mark's culture, Bible stories played a much bigger role than they do for most of us – the stories of the Old Testament were not just holy scripture – they were also the bedtime stories, the tales you told around a campfire. And in cultures where stories were passed down through oral traditions, remembered by telling rather than by reading, literary scholar John Foley says that just a few words can evoke a whole story and all the emotions that come with it – he calls it “traditional referentiality,” meaning that when you use a key phrase, you are referring to the whole tradition – the whole story and all of the ideas that come with it. In American culture, when I say “glass slipper,” you think “Cinderella.” You might think of different tellings of Cinderella; you might think of the Disney movie or the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical or the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, or all three. You might think not just of glass slippers but of the pumpkin carriage, the clock striking midnight, the evil stepmother. You might think of your own experiences with this story, or its connections to other stories.

That is the kind of complexity that Mark and the people of his time brought to Bible stories. When Mark says “six days,” Mark is mentioning the story of creation, where God worked for six days and rested on the seventh. And when Mark says “mountaintop,” Mark is reminding us of Mount Sinai, where Moses talked with God and received the law, and of Zion, the holy mountain of Jerusalem. When Mark says “Moses,” we are supposed to think of the whole story of the Exodus, of Israel fleeing slavery, receiving

the law, eating manna in the wilderness. When Mark says “Elijah,” we are supposed to remember the entire life of this great Prophet, his miracles, and the chariot of fire that carries him to heaven. And when God speaks the words “This is my Son the Beloved,” we are supposed to remember that very first story that Mark tells at the beginning of the Gospel, where Jesus is baptized in the Jordan and the heavens open, and God says these words for the first time. In this short little story, Mark evokes all of these stories – stories where the human and the divine meet – stories of glory and awe and holiness. Mark crafts this story so that the glory is thick in the air; then, when Mark tells the story of Easter morning, he points back to this story, with a few words, words that remind us of what Jesus promised the disciples: he has been raised.

I imagine that Jesus’ promise of resurrection sounded very different to the disciples up on that mountaintop than it sounded when they were among the crowds. Before they get to the mountaintop, Jesus has already predicted his death and resurrection once, and Peter rebuked him until Jesus shouted “get behind me, Satan!” Among the crowds, Peter probably felt the threat of Jesus’ death much more clearly than the promise of resurrection. But here, in the midst of all this glory, I imagine that the disciples could really hear that promise coming through. When Jesus asks them not to speak about what has happened until he has died and risen, he is saying, things are about to get very dark, but what you have just seen is only a foretaste of what lies on the other side.

So we feel the power of the story most clearly when we recognize that this is a story where the disciples are prepared for what lies ahead. And it prepares us for what lies ahead, as well – Lent begins on Wednesday; on Ash Wednesday we are reminded of our own mortality, and for forty days we go through the repentance and preparation and solemnity of Lent. Finally we will reach Holy Week and some of us will sit together in the dark here on Good Friday, remembering the crucifixion. But before we set out on that Lenten journey, we get this one preview – this glimpse, this reminder, that Easter lies ahead; that things will not be dark and solemn forever; and like the disciples, we can carry this promise of Easter with us.

On January 20th of this year, an African-American woman stood on the Mall in Washington D.C. She held a sign that said “We have overcome.” That sign reflected our national sentiment that day – we were proud, even people who had not voted for Obama, about the promises that were being fulfilled that day; proud to know that this country could elect a black president; proud to see how far we had come as a nation. That sign reminded me of the journey this country has been on. I thought about the faith that it must have sometimes taken to sing “We Shall Overcome,” that sometimes the promise of racial justice must have seemed about as unlikely as Jesus’ promise to rise from the dead seemed to the disciples. I thought about Martin Luther King Jr., who just before he died, said that we would get there someday; who said that he had seen it from the mountaintop. And I thought about the students I tutor in Harlem. In the days after the election, there was a palpable change in the air at the youth center, a buzz of hope and excitement. I

thought about all of these things when I saw this woman at the Inauguration of our first African-American president, and I was so overwhelmed and proud that I wept in front of the television. And like Peter, I would have liked to build a tent there, to stay forever with that sense of pride and victory.

This week, the New York Post printed a cartoon which seemed to portray the President as an ape. The Post says that this is not what the cartoon was supposed to mean; but if it was not intentionally racist, the cartoon was at the least thoughtless and negligently insensitive to this country's history of racism. It brought home the fact that race relations in America is still a pressing issue; that although we have come a long way, we have not yet overcome; the reality that this is not a post-racial society, and that a long hard journey lies between us and real racial justice. But the Transfiguration story reminds us that the brief glimpses of glory that we do see are real promises that God is working and will continue to work in this world. The Inauguration was a brief, glorious moment, something we can carry with us, as we go on towards social justice, giving us certitude in the promise of "we shall overcome." For one brief, glorious moment, we felt it.

And that is what the transfiguration offers us today: a glimpse of glory in the midst of a broken world; a shining memory to carry with us as we go forward through the dark; the knowledge that, as certainly as spring comes after winter, Easter lies on the other side of Lent.