

“Follow Jesus to Transformation”

Salado UMC—11 February 2018
5th Sunday after the Epiphany/Transfiguration
Preaching Text: Mark 9:2-9—Year B
Salado, Texas 76571

“The one thing more difficult than following a regimen is not imposing it on others” Marcel Proust (1871—1922).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

[2] Six days later, 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, [3] and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. [4] And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. [5] 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.” [6] He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

[7] Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” [8] Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. [9] 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 (Mark 9:2-9).

This coming Ash Wednesday our congregation joins churches worldwide in our Lenten observance. Some will ask their Lenten question: “what shall I give up for Lent?” Perhaps, this is not a bad question. We can say that giving something up can put us in closer touch with God. But often “giving up something for Lent” mocks an otherwise virtuous spiritual practice, as in: “I am giving up chocolate for Lent” or “I am giving up texting while driving for Lent.”

On this last Epiphany Sunday may we reflect first on our biblical text. In Lent we prepare as individuals and as a community of faith for Jesus’ suffering, death, and passion. Rather than giving up something—even if we can—may we at least attend to the biblical story. How do we prepare for Lent? Maybe the disciples can offer us a path. Mark tells us the disciples have been with Jesus some time now. Before their ascent of the mountain, two events set the context of the Transfiguration. First, Peter answers Jesus’ question about Jesus’ identity: “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29).

Second, Jesus summarizes what it really means to be “messiah.” The messiah will suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities, and will be killed. Yet, Jesus’ final word is one of hope: “after three days [I] will rise again.” The hope is lost on Peter, who immediately rebukes Jesus. But Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, telling him that he is setting his mind on human things and not divine things. Is this any way to set the mood for the revelation of Christ’s transfiguration glory? Surely the disciples questioned why Jesus would be so gloomy about being Israel’s promised Messiah.

Yet, Mark tells the Gospel readers that the disciples were not up to the moment equipped to understand who Jesus was or why he came. Perchance, later, they would know, but not until after the resurrection. So, for the disciples to proclaim Jesus' messiahship, at this point in Mark's story, reminds us of Yahweh's words to Job:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me (Job 38:1-3).

In Job and with respect to the disciples, none of them knew God's ways fully nor what was happening on the bigger cosmic stage. The mountain top view gives perspective. Before Jesus' revelation, the disciples had been perplexed/afraid. But . . . all people need perspective—even disciples—maybe most expressly disciples! By perspective, I simply mean gaining an insight into separating the truly important from things seemingly important. John Dewey in *A Common Faith* judged the religious as "whatever introduces genuine perspective . . . into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence" (*Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey*, by Daniel F. Rice. SUNY, Albany, 1993, p. 56). Unless we look for the true things with proper perspective, then we will never see what it is we need to see to be God's people.

My friend and former Temple District Superintendent, Bobby Weathers, was in the Temple H-E-B grocery store years ago trying to find the items on his spouse's grocery list. One item stumped him: a 19-inch Graham cracker pie crust. He found the pie crust section, but no 19-inch Graham cracker pie crusts. The manager said they were out of them, but would have some on Monday. But Bobby said Mary needed the pie crust now, so the search continued. After about ten employees and other customers looked high and low—a covered-dish dinner was at stake after all—a woman said, "Let me look at that list." Then she said, "Could your wife have meant "a one 9-inch pie crust" instead of a "19-inch Graham cracker pie crust?" Mystery solved—but just in case Bob bought two crusts which added up to 18 inches! If we search for the wrong item, then we will never find what we need to give a properly divine perspective on life.

The life of prayer offers this spiritual perspective. This is why we speak about prayer more at Lent than any other time. Prayer is not simply needed when we know things are out of our control, as for example in the hospital's emergency room. Prayer helps us keep the perspective that, for those who follow Christ, the life God has given us is always out of our control. This is the rub for those who profess faith in the God of Jesus: "we are not our own, we have been bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). The Transfiguration was pure experience for three disciples. Their experience showed them, in a mysterious way, that Jesus was who he claimed. Seeing who Jesus really is in fact is one way that God transforms us.

A sign of a healthy spiritual person is one who takes Paul's guidance to heart—be "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God" (Romans 2:12). Transformation is quest for life's meaning—and allows God to change us into what God created us to be. God takes the stuff of brain and heart and shapes a unique creature—you/me/us.

Walker Percy's character in the novel *The Moviegoer* said it right:

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

Thus, we have a choice: the quest or the despair of a common/unreflective person.

One of the primary characteristics of a healthy church is simply to transform people from mere biological creatures into something much more magnificent. Notice something engaging about this characteristic of transformation: Two of the most weighty and powerful symbols of the Christian life are symbols of transformation—the caterpillar into a butterfly and death into life. Jesus took a cross, the symbol of shame and dishonor, and by his death and resurrection he remade (re-symbolized) the cross into a symbol of hope.

Clearly the task of a church is to transform people, values, and meaning from something less than fully human into something more fully faithful. In fact, we could measure any church as successful by its ability to change people's lives. We might even measure our church's success by the measure of transforming people into something bearing marks of a new creation.

David N. Mosser, FUMC of Arlington, TX 76011

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May pray as we move toward Ash Wednesday and a sense of spiritual discipline as we prepare to go with Jesus toward the cross?

Holy God, upon the mountain you revealed our Messiah,
who by his death and resurrection would fulfill both the law and the prophets.

By this transfiguration enlighten our path
that we may dare to suffer with him in the service of humanity
and so share in the everlasting glory of him
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever. Amen.

(Larry Hull Stookey: Transfiguration Prayer: #259 in *UMH*).