

Jesse Perkins
Thursday, February 11, 2021
Year B, Last Sunday of Epiphany

2 Kings 2:1-12
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

“Lights in the Dark”

- Recently, I gave in to all the recommendations on my news feeds, and I watched WandaVision on Disney+
 - This is what we do these days at the Perkins house on Saturdays when it is 0 degrees outside during a pandemic... right? Binge shows
 - It is very good, and you have to get past episode four before you will think that
 - It is a show set in the Marvel universe, it is about members of the Avengers after they defeated Thanos
 - WandaVision is about super heroes with nods to the old TV shows of the past decades
 - It has it all- mystery, super powers, people who glow with intensity...
 - Fun fact-these radioactive-enabled super heroes, it was speculated by Wired magazine ¹, was spawned by a magazine article in 1953
 - The magazine was Mechanix Illustrated, and the title of that article was "How Nuclear Radiation Can Change Our Race."
 - The mystery of how radiation was going to affect us, combined with the fear of the nuclear arms race and duck and cover drills, allowed our imaginations to run wild.
 - Thus the initial advent of these super hero characters
 - And it is also about struggling with grief, loss, and sorrow, and what I hope finally as the series continues the overcoming of that with light
 - I suppose by now you know me well enough to figure out where I am going with this today
 - I just cannot resist combining this, with the Transfiguration in our Gospel

¹ http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/03/pl_prototype_radiation/

- But more to the point is that SciFi has always shined a light on who we are and what we are struggling with, even though it has a fictional aspect
- It's true with Xmen, star trek, star wars, the matrix... all of them
- And seeing Jesus glowing before the disciples as in one of these movies or comic books
- Leaving him and everyone in the vicinity altered somehow by the mysterious glow radiating off of him
- The connection happens for me every time I read this passage
- Please do not take this the wrong way- I am not dismissing what has become a major feast in the church by comparing it to comic books
- Quite the opposite: after all of the impact these movies and comics have had on our culture
 - One can only take the Transfiguration more seriously.
 - Maybe in some way the Transfiguration was inspiration for these authors
- And comparing it to the radiation in these comic book stories might just help us see what all three synoptic gospels are trying to tell us here
- Are trying to illustrate what happened on that mountain top that day
- This scene from Jesus' life is located in the middle of the Gospel of Mark
 - Here, it is meant to be a pivotal point in the story; a peak in the plot arc
 - And how appropriate for us on this Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany and the one immediately before Ash Wednesday
 - We began this season of Epiphany back in January with Jesus' baptism, hearing the voice from heaven:
 - "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."
 - The text for that one is ambiguous- we are left wondering if anyone other than Jesus has actually heard this voice.
 - The gospel of Mark seems to start quiet and crescendos as it goes along
 - Because here, bookending the whole season, is another voice from heaven telling the disciples to listen to him
 - And for this one there is no doubt it was heard by all present. ²
 - For a fleeting moment, the three disciples are able to see past the veil that blinds in this world, and see Jesus for who he really is

² PulpitFiction, Last Epiphany 2018, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/transfigurationb>

- He is clothed in dazzling white- whiter than bleach the author assures us, this is something unnatural, or supernatural
- The very energy present in creation was here again in this moment- shining as brightly as the newly created sun in Genesis ³
- And the disciples are left speechless, or babbling something about building three dwelling places and never leaving again
- In all three synoptic gospels, Jesus is seen walking and talking with two people: Moses and Elijah
 - There are some very specific things the gospel authors want us to know about this experience
 - More than simply who Jesus is- Jesus is now connected and is part of an ongoing work of God
 - Both of these prophets were central to Israel's understanding of God's salvation
 - These prophets both parted water and walked on dry ground. ⁴
 - Both of these leaders ended their lives on a mountaintop- Moses dying before entering the Promise Land
 - Elijah being taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot
 - Together, these men represent all divine authority for the Jewish people: Moses with the law, and Elijah with the prophetic tradition
 - And now there is Jesus, continuing their tradition and work
 - Jesus talking with these men clearly tells us that Jesus is a part of God's ongoing redeeming and saving work
 - Jesus, having calmed the storm and walked on the water earlier in Mark, now on a mountaintop
 - And contemplating his own future
- I find myself in awe of Jesus here in this moment, and with many of the decisions he makes within these grand moments of divine manifestation
 - I remind myself: Jesus was fully human, even in moments like these
 - Certainly, Jesus must have been aware of what would eventually come to pass if he continues his ministry
 - Perhaps Jesus, here on this mountaintop, had the choice to leave or stay

³ <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-02-19/transfiguration-sunday>

⁴ Soards, Marion, ed., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 177

- To be taken up into heaven like Elijah, or peacefully buried like Moses
- But Jesus chose a different path there on that mountain
- Jesus answer was clear as he descended to continue his journey eventually leading to the cross
- A little later in Mark, as Jesus left the bright mountain top, he went straight into the darkness and healed a boy possessed by a demon
- Like the super heroes in the comics and movies, Jesus took who he was and what he received, and used it for good.
- We do not know exactly what the disciples saw on that mountain top
 - I am sure they did the best they could to describe it to the believers who follow them
 - Who would later record it in what would become the Gospel of Mark some thirty years later⁵
 - Jesus, Dazzling white clothes, stunned silence, voice from heaven, and babbling words about making dwelling places
 - It is a bit of a mystery, as one is often left without adequate words to describe something so extraordinary and holy
 - But what a gift, the experience of something beyond explanation and understanding
 - It reminds us that we, no matter what we do or how smart we are, can never fully understand or explain God
 - And that can open us up to awe and wonder.
 - This God, made manifest in Jesus, while in some ways is tangible and touchable, is also beyond explanation, mysterious, and awe-inspiring
 - Should we ever get too confident, too certain, and believe we know everything there is to know
 - There is always more to learn, more understanding to be had, than what we currently have
 - We can look no further to the astounded disciples as they caught just a glimpse of Jesus' true and unknowable nature
 - There is so much more to God than we can see or understand.
 - But we do know this: this event left its impression on the disciples
 - It was almost an after glow: God's creative energy present in that moment in Jesus Christ stuck with them

⁵ Authorship of Mark 66 CE, approx thirty years after Jesus' death. Source: Introduction to the Gospel of Mark, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV, Fourth Edition.

- And this event, with the others they witnessed, was enough to eventually convince them that in fact sJesus was the Son of God
 - The great Epiphany, the great realization
- It change them into something different from what they were
- They were transformed.
- I wonder- as they walked together down the mountain, if they didn't also glow just a little bit. ⁶
- Perhaps that is the hint we can take away from the Marvel universe
 - And even the Transfiguration
 - When we come close to the divine, when we are exposed to that energy, love, and forgiveness, it can change us at our core.
 - Today is the last day of this season of Epiphany
 - We, like the disciples, have come to see Jesus as much more than a prophet, or a teacher, or even the ancient understanding of a Messiah
 - Now they get it: Jesus is God's very word made flesh.
 - This understanding comes in our liturgical cycle just before we begin our Lenten walk towards crucifixion.
 - We, along with the disciples, now understand that we have been standing in the presence of some powerful energy
 - So the question is this: how has this Epiphany of Jesus Christ changed us?
 - Because without transformation, what we do here is just empty words
 - The Gospel, at its center, is transformative and will not leave us as we are
 - It probably won't change us into Christian X-Men, or Godly Hulks
 - But it can give us a new identity; change our very core, lead us to a rebirth, a death and resurrection
 - Give us a glow that is unique, different, offering something else other than the shallow solutions offered by our culture
 - Something deeper, more lasting, more fulfilling.
 - And after, we too can glow a little, reflecting the light of Christ to which we have been exposed.
 - I think there is a call here for us today, for us as a church
 - To be that kind of light, that kind of influence, in our world
 - There is a lot of darkness.

⁶ <http://www.sermonsuite.com/free.php?i=788032193&key=2piCqdyopnPuo8nb>

- And while we cannot control all that is going on in our world, we can chose to be in that world in a different way
- To shine with hope, compassion, and acceptance in the face of hate, oppression, and tragedy
- We can make a difference here.
- We can descend from the mountain top to shine brightly
- We can be lights in the dark.

Amen.