

Before Lent

Mark 9:2-9

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This Transfiguration story has dream-like qualities, doesn't it? Have you ever dreamed of someone but they did not look like themselves. It only makes sense in the dream. Peter, James and John see Moses and Elijah with Jesus – yet how did they recognize them? Old photographs? Etchings from antiquity? It only makes sense in the dream. Biblical scholars have often noted the dream-like quality of this passage in Mark's Gospel, this transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain. Jesus and his closest three followers--Peter, James, and John--go up a high mountain. Nothing unusual about that, but suddenly Jesus is changed. His clothes become a blinding white, and they are joined by Elijah and Moses. Peter proposes a monument to mark the occasion, when a cloud comes over them, and the heavenly voice declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And that suddenly, everything is back to normal. No voice. No cloud. No Elijah or Moses. No white robe. No nothing. No wonder Mark writes about how the disciples "kept the matter to themselves."

There is an intriguing book of dreams by Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*. While fictional, parts are based on the life of Albert Einstein. In the book it is the early nineteen hundreds and Einstein is working on the theory of relativity: the theory of how time works. As he contemplates his theory of time, he begins to have a series of dreams of how time might work differently.

Some of the dreams are funny. There is one where time moves slower at higher altitudes so everyone rushes to build their homes in the mountains – or even on stilts. Other dreams are more serious or more mysterious. In one time repeats itself over and over and over again. In that dream there is no future, nothing to hope for. In another dream there is no past, no memory of what has gone before – only an eternal present. Time stands still in another, snowflakes suspended in mid air. People caught mid step or hugging their loved ones.

While we struggle to understand the dream-like story of the Transfiguration, the story itself offers insight. The story is told in two parts. First there is the part that happens on the mountain and then there is the discussion Jesus and the disciples have about what happened as they come down from the mountain. Beginning in v. 9, Mark tells us what Jesus has to say about the whole event: "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." I know, that doesn't seem like much help, but there is something there for us if we will hear, because Mark is giving us interpretive clues.

On Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent begins, we are given a glimpse of the big picture. You see, in Mark's Gospel there are three major confessions of the Christ's identity:

the first at his baptism, when the heavenly voice declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved." It's a scene of glory. The last is on the cross, when after Jesus' death, a Roman soldier confesses, "Truly this man was God's Son!" It's a scene of suffering. In between these two is this one, a confession that combines his glory and his suffering. Peter wants to build some monuments on the mountain, but the only monument will become a cross on a hillside.

None of us really want to go through Lent to get to Easter. Can't we just skip the ashes and sackcloth? Can't we jump ahead to spring? Please!! Can't we just sing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" and be done with all of the suffering? The disciples felt the same way. Can't we just overthrow the Romans and be done with it all?

You probably are aware that in the Gospels the disciples don't always come off looking so good. That's especially true with Mark's Gospel. In this account of the life of Jesus, the disciples are repeatedly portrayed as thick, blind. In fact, in this section of Mark, it's a blind man who proclaims the true identity of Jesus, while his closest followers stumble around in the dark. As one commentator once noted, in Mark's Gospel anytime the disciples are afraid, you could just as easily translate it as confused. In other words, the Greek word for "terrified" is "duh." Peter didn't know what to say, writes Mark, "for they were terrified." Same thing in this case.

We'd rather take the shortcut to Easter, but we can't. In his book *Peculiar Speech*, Will Willimon says, "When you join the Rotary they give you a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church we throw you in water and half drown you." The Lenten journey ahead of us begins with ashes and leads toward a cross. That's the rough truth.

But it's not the whole truth. You see, if scholars are right, that the transfiguration is a glimpse of things to come, then it is worth noting that Jesus' words of explanation end in resurrection. He comes down from the mountain and warns them not to say anything about what happened until he is raised from the dead. If the beginning of Lent is ashes, its end is resurrection. As Christians, we dare to dream that it is true, that the Christ has been raised. Along with God, we dare to dream of a world where love lasts, war doesn't. We dare to dream that the private pain we carry with us will someday be put to rest. We dare to dream of a different way of being in the world. We dare to believe that our loved ones who have died in Christ will also be raised in Christ. Now, tell me, who, other than God, could have dreamt that?

Isn't that why you're here today instead of warm and in bed? Aren't you here because you believe in the dream that Jesus had? The dream that says blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are the sorrowful and blessed are the hungry? Don't we gather together, because the one named Jesus told us we are beloved of God and not just valued for what we know and what we can do. Aren't we here because there is a dream of a kingdom where nothing is lost and that was broken will be healed and everyone will be welcomed home?

In that book Einstein has these thirty dreams, all of them interesting and powerful in their own right. But one of them stands out. The dream begins like this: "A mushy, brown peach is lifted from the garbage and placed on the table to pinken. It pinkens, turns hard, it is carried in a

shopping sack to the grocer's, put on a shelf, removed and crated, returned to the tree with pink blossoms." Life out of death!

The dream ends something like this: A woman stands at the graveside of her husband, throws a handful of dirt on the coffin, and feels the cold, April rain slap against her cheeks. But she does not cry. She looks ahead a few days when her husband's lungs will be strong, when he will check out of the hospital, when he will be well enough to get out of his bed at home. She looks ahead when the two of them will eat together, make love, go for a walk, just talk and laugh together. She does not cry. She waits for a day she remembers in the future when the two of them will be together and life will be new.

Starting Wednesday, we will enter the season of Lent. It is a somber season, one of reflection on human frailty and human failings. We don't observe this season out of a perverse need to chastise ourselves. We do it because it is real. There is darkness in the human experience. There is pain and suffering. And not just in Lent! How nice it would be if pain and suffering were relegated to only those six weeks. We pay attention to the human condition because it is real and because Jesus came to bless and heal our situation. In the gospel of Mark, this mountain top experience gives the disciples a glimpse of glory to carry them the dark days ahead. For us, this story helps remind us as we journey through Lent that suffering is not the point, Jesus' triumph over all suffering is. And in the context of our day to day life – where pain, suffering and loss are all too real – this dream of a story can feed our hope that there will be, in God's time, an end to pain – a time when all things are transfigured into glory.

Let us pray. Most gracious God, bless your word this day wherever it is read, wherever it is heard, wherever it is preached, most especially, wherever it is lived. Amen.