

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, February 14, 2021 // The Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year B

Mark 9:2-9

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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 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." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

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.

Background and general observations

The season after the Epiphany concludes with one of the most powerful epiphanies of all – the Transfiguration. This story comes at the center of Mark's story, between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. Jesus takes his "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain. As we know, a mountaintop is understood to be a place for divine encounter – Moses received the Ten Commandments and covenant there; Elijah experienced God in "a still small voice" there; and Jesus of course delivered the "Sermon on the Mount" there.

It is here, up this "high mountain apart," where Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples. There is an other-worldly quality to this event, as we read that Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, "such as no one on earth could bleach them." The appearance of Moses and Elijah perhaps symbolizes the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Their appearance with Jesus clearly places him in a position of prominence, and some have suggested that this event symbolizes the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment or summary or goal of all of the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The often impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the sight. Is this the all-too-human attempt to institutionalize that which cannot be institutionalized?

Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved"; but with the additional command, "listen to him!" We might remember that just before going up the mountain with Jesus, Peter had rebuked Jesus for saying that Jesus must undergo suffering, be killed, and then rise from the dead. (Mk 8:31-33) Now, Peter is being told clearly to "listen," perhaps pointing out that Peter has done enough inappropriate talking.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The fact that even Jesus' inner circle of disciples do not seem to understand divine occurrences, sometimes say very inappropriate things, and even let Jesus down when the going gets tough (falling asleep in Gethsemane), might give us some relief – when we blow it with regard to God, we might remember that even the inner circle or cream of the crop failed miserably at times. But the fact that Jesus had an inner circle at all might remind us of just how important it can be to have an "inner circle" ourselves – special people we love, trust and rely upon. Who

might be in your “inner circle”? What makes a person the right one to be in such a trusted and important position in one’s life? How might you be such a person to someone in your life?

2. Some have said about the Transfiguration that this event is an “unveiling,” that the disciples are simply able to see Jesus clearly for who he is in all of his glory. It’s not that something has happened to change Jesus, it’s just that the disciples are seeing things, for a brief moment, as they really are. The veil has been lifted for a moment, and what used to seem quite ordinary now is seen as it really is.

When have you experienced such an unveiling? Have you gone through much of your life thinking of the people and places around you as being “ordinary” and unremarkable but then saw things differently? Out of the blue, have you been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you? What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just an unveiling of the deeper truth about our lives that we unfortunately miss all too often? How can we more often position ourselves to see the world aright, in all its glory, instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are humdrum or ordinary?

3. The Greek word that Mark uses for the transfiguration is the same word that Paul uses to describe the change that is to take place within ourselves: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (transfigured) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) What do you think this transformation or transfiguration of yourself is all about? Is this the point of being a Christian – that we pattern our lives in such a way and turn our attention to such divine things, so that we are transformed? Do you sense yourself being so transformed at times?
4. An Episcopal monk once wrote: “Almost everyone I know in the church complains about being too busy. We know being busy probably isn’t very good for us. Most of us have been so busy for so long and accomplished so little that we are quick to admit to the futility of all of this activity. But I wonder how often we see all of the busyness as sin. I wonder how often we see it as a kind of avoidance of being drawn into the real worship of God. I wonder if we realize how much our prayer suffers because of the lack of space in our lives. Not that we don’t make time for prayer. We may be quite faithful about carving out the time for prayer. But how often are we willing to surround the prayer with the solitude and leisure which is so important for listening to God?” (From an old newsletter published by the Society of St. John the Evangelist, written by Thomas Shaw, now deceased, who was the order’s Superior then, and later served as Bishop of Massachusetts.)

It has been said that God gave Ten Commandments on the mountain top in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).” Do these reflections help you understand the importance of listening? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid this kind of listening? What keeps you from devoting more time to quiet and listening?