2-14-21, The Holy Way

Sermon on Mark 9:2—9

1. Introduction
2. The event described in this passage is ordinarily called The Transfiguration.
3. It is described in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As we might expect, Mark’s account is pretty direct and to the point.
4. In Luke’s telling of this event, Jesus’s friends are asleep while Jesus was praying. This may indicate that the event happened during the night, which gives a different view of what the disciples saw.
5. Prayer
6. The text
7. (v. 2—4) Six days later [That is, six days after Peter had proclaimed Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”] Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.
8. (v. 2b & 3) And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.
9. (v. 4) And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses [Moses represents the Torah and Elijah the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.] who were talking with Jesus.
10. (v. 5 & 6) Then Peter said to Jesus [and is anybody surprised that Peter is the one who starts talking first?] “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 [or perhaps, he didn’t know what he was saying] for they were terrified.
11. (v. 7 & 8) 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. [Some of the commentators write that this affirmation from God about Jesus is a correction to Peter’s mad suggestion about building booths. Peter seems to put the three, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, on equal footing. In this view, God is saying to Peter and the others, “There aren’t three equal beings. The one who matters is Jesus, my Son, my Beloved, and the one you need to pay attention to.]
12. (v. 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. [This is sometimes referred to as the messianic secret. Why does Jesus instruct them not to tell anyone about what they’ve experienced? The consensus among the commentators, and the explanation that makes the most sense to me, is that it is not yet time for Jesus to be shown to be the Messiah. Israel was looking and longing for a Messiah who would be a military king who drive out the hated Romans. This vision was too small to capture who Jesus was and what he would do. But an uprising against Rome would result in a massive slaughter, just as happened in the year 70. Jesus knows that he and his mission would be misunderstood, and he knows that his time has not yet come.]
13. What shall we take away from this passage this morning?

I think that our tendency, when we think about the transfiguration, is to say that Jesus was transformed into something different for a little while. This is understandable, but I’ve come to believe that it’s at least inadequate, if not wrong. A few weeks ago, I raised the question of Jesus’ person and identity prior to his birth in Bethlehem.

Some of the commentators have raised the idea that what the disciples observed on the top of the mountain was Jesus as he actually was and is. That view holds that the Jesus who was born, walked and talked, taught and healed, lived and died and was raised again, this Jesus who is God with skin on was only a temporary departure from his person and identity from before the beginning and throughout all eternity. Those who hold this view would say that the disciples see Jesus as he had always been up to his physical birth.

So, is this kind of speculation useful? I think that it can be. We cling to the truth that Jesus was a human being, born of Mary and that he did everything other humans do except sin. This truth is vital to our understanding of the Gospel. Only a human Jesus, who had walked in our shoes, could take our place, paying on the cross for our sin.

At precisely the same time the Jesus who brought about our reconciliation with God, is this cosmic power capable of taking on both sin and death and destroying single-handedly their ultimate power. The Jesus who walks with us daily, to whom we cry out in pain or fear or grief or remorse, is this person of godly might and power, on whom we can rely absolutely. So we need both forms and identities of Jesus. The humble preacher from Galilee and the Lord over all the cosmos.

If we accept that this is the cosmic meaning of the transfiguration, we still have to ask our selves whether there is any application for us as we live our lives, and I think the answer is yes. I think what the transfiguration speaks to us of and guides us toward transformation. I don’t know how many times you’ve heard me say that the God we worship is a God of transformation, but I do know it’s a lot.

Friends, the good and beautiful news for us is that we are not the same people we were a year ago or a month ago or even a day ago. Jesus, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, is transforming us. We do not transform ourselves, that’s the work of the Holy Spirit. But we are able to participate in transformation. So, what are the things we can be doing?

Probably the list I’m recommending won’t surprise you. I encourage you to read the Bible more. I encourage you to spend time in prayer, including listening to God. I encourage you to do acts of kindness. But I also encourage you to pay attention to what you’re consuming. I don’t so much mean what you’re eating or drinking. I really mean what you’re watching and listening to.

Does what you watch draw you closer to God? And perhaps more important, does it encourage you to the attitudes and practices which honor God, that is to humility, grace, patience, and love? Or does the content you’re watching rile you up? Does it make you angry, and have you learned that this anger feels good? Do you look forward to that feeling of righteous indignation? And by the way, I’m talking about sources on both the political right and the left.

Friends, God has loved you so extravagantly. And that love continues and will always be. I encourage you to focus on that. I encourage you to immerse yourselves in that. And I encourage you to rejoice in the transforming work of the god who loves you so much.

The Savior we follow is indeed the son of a humble carpenter in Galilee, and also a force more powerful than any anywhere in the cosmos. May we, you and I, rejoice in that, and may we know the loving transformation taking place in each of us. May it be so. Amen

What is it that Jesus does in the transfiguration?

What does the transfiguration mean to us? Transformation