

More than a Moment in Time

by

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February 14, 2021
Transfiguration of the Lord

Mark 9:2-9

²Six 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, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then 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.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Like some of you I have spent time over the last many months sorting. Admittedly in some cases my clearing away a few piles has only created others! And I have not culled through my clothes because I'm afraid my pandemic wardrobe would skew what I think I will need when I return to wearing normal work clothes again. But I have packed up some old books and given them to Project HOME's Book Re-sale business. I have de-cluttered some cabinets and better organized some drawers. In so doing I have come across a number of old photographs of our children.

I find myself amazed that I can look at their very young faces and see glimpses back then of who they are now, even in their tall young adult frames and bearded faces. In those little boy pictures at one and three-years-old, at five and seven, with their smooth skin and pensive eyes and sweet smiles I can see now there was also a look that hints at who they were becoming. People say James favors my side of the family, but he has his father's eyes. Winston does favor the Arney clan, but he also looks a lot like one of my brothers did growing up. In those old photographs, caught in a moment of time, I can see the past – even past generations, as well as glimpses of what was yet to come.

So it is with the Transfiguration of Jesus. What we see in this biblical account is so much more than a moment in time. Jesus has been going about his ministry proclaiming the Kingdom of God, healing the sick, feeding hungry people, teaching about the nature of God and arguing with the religious authorities about matters of faith and religious practice. Then all of the sudden, the text says, Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain..."

Mark does not record what happened in those six days, and we might simply think it was a week of more of the same, a week so ordinary that there was nothing new to report. However, we know what takes place after every sixth day – the observance of the Sabbath. Mark is preparing us to recognize that the Transfiguration happened on the

seventh day, the day set apart for the worship of God, and in the context of worship – it was a moment of special revelation.

That's what the Transfiguration is, a moment in Jesus' life where – bright shining as the sun, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God. But more than one moment in time, as in an old photograph, we are shown how Jesus reflects the presence of his forebears. He is placed in the lineup of Israel's greatest leaders - Moses representing the Law and Elijah, the prophets. We can see their faces in the light of his!

Peter is so enthralled by this holy splendor, he wants to build a dwelling place, to stay up on that mountain top and bask in the glory of Jesus united with these religious giants of the past forever. But what Peter cannot yet see is that something about the future is also being revealed. In Jesus' bright, shining transfigured face we also catch a glimpse of what is to come. For the next time we see anything that resembles "dazzling white" will be when we encounter the angel in the empty tomb of resurrection saying, "He is not here. He has been raised!"

The Transfiguration is so much more than one moment in time, because in that moment we see glimpses of the past and hope for the future. In this one moment we are called to remember God's ancient intentions for the human family revealed to Moses with the Ten Commandments, and when the people of God failed to keep those commandments, God's prophets who came to correct them and set them on the right path again. With the Law and the Prophets represented in this divine line-up with Jesus we are also called to remember who we are meant to be: We are God's people who have been given God's commandments for a civil and just human society.

The Ten Commandments are not simply religious practices; they are pillars for a peaceful social and political human community: Worship God alone. Keep Sabbath to remember that you belong to God. Honor your parents. Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal

or lie, or covet what your neighbor has. The Transfiguration of Jesus, you see, reminds us who we are and how we are supposed to live in covenant relationship with God and the human community. Like an old photograph in which we can see more than a moment in time, there is a lot of sacred memory packed into this one moment of Jesus' Transfiguration. It says a lot about who Jesus is; it says a lot about who we are supposed to be too. The Transfiguration reminds us that the present time is not the whole story. It reveals who Jesus is, and thereby challenges us to be transformed into something that is better and brighter and more life-giving for the future.

I think we have arrived at such a moment in our country. This week, during the Impeachment hearings, we have had to relive last month's violent insurrection at the United States Capital, a moment many would like to put behind us and let bygones be bygones. But such a moment should not be soon forgotten. It has revealed a past that every American is called upon to reckon with in our time: the sin of slavery and its legacy of white supremacy. It has revealed the violence that lies in our heart of our culture and communities when one person's so-called freedom to carry a gun often means the senseless deaths of countless others.

The violent assault on the Capital revealed something terrible about the times in which we live while lies are counted as truth, including the terrible mistruth that one race is more entitled than another. The crowd who attacked the Capital also revealed a perversion of our faith as crosses were worn and prayers were prayed in the name of Jesus while the insurrectionists were calling for the death of some of our elected leaders, and people were being killed and maimed in the process. You don't have to watch a lot of the video footage to see that what happened was not just about a polarized and broken political climate. It was also a religious reckoning because nearly all of the Ten Commandments were broken that day.

Shortly after September 11, 2001, Charles Kimball of Wake Forest University wrote “When Religion Becomes Evil.” At the time, the book helped us better understand a more pluralistic world and its diverse religions. Now, his “warning signs” seem to have landed not only in our country but also as an excuse for many who claim the Christian faith. He posited these five indicators that a religion had become corrupt: when it makes absolute truth claims; demonstrates blind obedience to a leader; establishes an “ideal” time for action, using the end to justify any means; and finally, when it declares holy war. ¹

There is in our country a growing armed militia movement of white supremacists who claim to be Christian and yet exercise a corrupted, even perverted version of the Christian faith. In the transfigured light of Jesus Christ, standing between Moses and Elijah, representing God’s Law and the message of the Prophets this reality is apparently visible. But there is something else that may be harder to see, because it resides deep inside of us. It has to do with our easy willingness to point out the sins and violence of others, and not reckon with our own internal struggles around issues of racism, our own complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression, and the escalating inequalities between rich and poor. We – who are highly educated, affluent suburban people sometimes lack the willingness to better understand what is going on in America’s impoverished, urban and rural communities where some of the economic systems that are floating our investment port-folios may be leaving in their wake: blighted communities of unemployment, poverty unimaginable, and people finding the way out through drugs and rapidly rising rates of suicide. The horrors we watch on the screen may be so much worse than the way we live, and yet, the Transfiguration shows how we are still being called to God’s ways of transformation for the world.

As biblical scholar Brian Blount has described the Transfiguration:

¹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*.

“While dwelling on the dirt of the present, those disciples were elevated into the ether of eternity. So they could see past the trees, see above the clouds, see beyond the haters, see around the fears, see through the threats, even through the titanic threat of death itself... and believe in life....”²

Jesus went up that mountain so that Peter and James and John could see that no matter how bleak this life gets, even unto the darkness of death, there will come a transfiguration of light. And when Peter asks how they might stay up there forever, Jesus doesn't answer him. God answers from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” Which, again, according to Brian Blount means, “Stop listening to the counsel of people who keep telling you to keep a low profile and don't stir up trouble. Stop listening to the voices that tell you to revel and recline in past greatness. Use the memory of your glorious past as the energy to fuel a determined fight for the glory of God in your present and future.”

Friends, this is not the time simply to point at the evil being perpetrated by others. But to ask ourselves, in the light of Jesus Christ, how am I actively loving God, honoring others, being faithful in my relationships, and challenging a culture that murders, lies, steals and covets? Remember Jesus and his disciples did not stay up there on that mountain of divine revelation. They took what they saw up there, caught in that moment in time, a glimpse of their past, present and future and they went down the mountain transfigured by God to do what they could to transform God's world.

So, at this moment in time, how will we do what we can to transform God's world for the good?

AMEN.

² Brian Blount, “Glory,” a sermon shared with the Union Presbyterian Seminary community Feb. 9, 2021, where Brian is President.