

Sermon: Next Steps  
Text: Mark 9:2-9  
Date: February 11, 2018  
Context: WWPC  
Transfiguration Sunday  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*And Jesus was transfigured before them.*

Mark 9:2

It's impossible to know for sure, since none of us were there. But I would imagine the question of what this "rising from the dead" might mean was not the only one Peter, James and John were discussing on their way down from that mountain.

Other possibilities include whether that really was Elijah and Moses who were talking with Jesus.

Because if it was those two men, those two pillars of the Jewish faith, that would be more than a little mind-blowing, given that they've both been dead for many centuries.

There is also the question of what in the world they had just witnessed. What was it, exactly, that happened to Jesus just now, when he got lit up like a human-sized star, blindingly bright and utterly wondrous?

Which may be only a slight variation on the question you're asking this morning. What really did happen to Jesus up on that mountain? And what in the world does this whole business of the transfiguration mean?

Even beyond that, what is so central about this story that appears almost exactly in the middle of the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke?

If pondering any of those questions, you're likely going to leave here a little disappointed. Because the honest to goodness truth is nobody knows for sure.

The only thing anybody can reliably say about the Transfiguration is that it's a mystery, plain and simple. Or maybe plain and extremely profound.

In commenting on this passage, scholars invariably point out that Moses and Elijah appeared on that mountaintop because they represent the law and the prophets -- again the central pillars of Jewish religious practice.

Which I suppose implies that Jesus is something new, something other something different than that. Maybe he is the fulfilment of the law. Maybe is the most powerful prophet of all: speaking with the very voice of God.

That may be right. But if so, if he does this -- if he fulfills the law and embodies and even transcends the prophets -- he does so, at least in this scene, by essentially turning into a bright beam of light.

Which is to say, we don't know for sure if that's what this astonishing episode is meant to convey. But it does tell us at least one thing about Jesus that we can be reasonably sure about. Something that only recently came into focus for me.

Over the last couple of weeks I've had a conversation with two different clergy colleagues about their reluctance to be seen outside of this specific context. When it comes to their identity as preachers, they want to get up in the pulpit, do their job well, and then be done with it.

Meaning, they would prefer that no audio or video recordings be made to share on the Web, and no manuscripts be posted there, either. (One of them doesn't use a manuscript, so that's not even an option.)

This conversation came up in part because another clergy friend of mine, Jacob Douylliez --- pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Marion, has begun sharing the services there on FB live.

In case you're wondering what that is, I would say that FB Live is the world's most convenient video streaming service, except that underdescribes what a technological marvel it is.

Jacob calls up Facebook on his phone, and presses a button to start recording.

While he is doing that, you call up FB on your phone or computer, press a button to start play, and you can then watch the service in its entirety, in real time, while you enjoy a late breakfast in your pajamas, or, in the passenger's' seat of your car, while you and your spouse -- the driver (who, let me stress, does not watch) -- make your way to your timeshare on Folly Beach. (Hey, it could happen.)

Jacob is a fair bit younger than most of us in this room are, so he is of that generation that is comfortable doing and sharing almost everything on FB, including church.

But that's not what's driving his effort to stream the services at Marion Frist. He wants people to see them. And as the preacher there, he naturally wants to be seen as part of that.

Sure, you can watch the service in your pajamas or in your car. But the gesture is intended more for people who can't get to church, people who are sick at home, or sick in the hospital, or not able to drive anymore, or apprehensive about getting the flu, or about driving in bad weather on sketchy roads.

It also extends their reach. A member of the Marion congregation is originally from Costa Rica, and evidently her whole family tunes into the service.

So, streaming the service like this, allows it, and allows Jacob, to be seen and heard anywhere in the world where you can get an internet connection.

In case you're wondering, yes, I'm now thinking about taking this idea to Session and exploring the possibility of streaming our services in this way. I want to stress that we certainly would not do this without giving the idea careful consideration.

Because while I personally like the idea, being seen on such a scale, in such a public way beyond the walls of a given sanctuary, is not for everyone.

It doesn't feel right to my other two pastor friends I mentioned earlier. And it may not be right for everyone here who helps lead or participate in our services.

I make this point to say that if there is a spectrum on this question of being seen in church, Jacob is at one end -- say, here -- and my other two friends are at the other -- say, here.

And I say this because in terms of his willingness, perhaps even his desire, to be seen, Jesus stands -- here. Well, above and beyond this spectrum.

Because you don't turn into a human-sized star, bright as the sun, if you don't want to be seen.

It is true that, afterward, Jesus orders his disciples not to tell anyone about what they've just seen. That secrecy is a big part of the story Mark tells about Jesus, about how he wants to keep his identity secret until he has completed his mission as savior and messiah.

But for generations of readers to follow, the whole point of this mysterious story, the thrust of this wondrous event, is for the world to see Jesus in all his radiant glory.

Which is why it's fitting that this Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, marks the end of the season of Epiphany. It's the church's way of extending the wonder of Christmas.

First we celebrate the miracle of the Incarnation and the wonder of Christ's birth. And then, right up until we begin our Lenten journey, we continue to celebrate the presence of God made manifest among us, the miracle and wonder of God made visible to our ordinary human eyes.

Now, here, Boom!, this season comes to an almost blinding climax as the human Jesus seems to burst into light itself: *God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God*, in the words of the Nicene Creed.

That light is going to come in handy because this story is about to take a very dark turn.

For the disciples, the experience of following Jesus has basically been a joy-ride to this point. Jesus launches his ministry with a giant party where he turns water into wine, and that's followed by a series of jaw-dropping miracles.

But this scene on this high mountain is an almost literal pivot point in this story. Because things are going to be very different for Jesus and the disciples when they come down from that mountain than they were when they climbed up it.

This country preacher, this nobody from nowhere, is about to leave the provinces behind. He is now ready to head for his final showdown with the powers that be, the powers that reign supreme in the capital city.

As the story approaches its final climax, he will be betrayed by one of his followers. He will be arrested and beaten by the security forces of his day.

In the end, having committed no serious crime, he will be detained, tried, found guilty, and subjected to an inhumane form of capital punishment by the state, an institution that has grown addicted to violence.

So, in case you thought the Bible was filled with nothing but family-friendly stories fit for children, it's not. It's better than that. By which I mean, it's filled with stories that speak their truth into a world exactly like ours.

And it starts, does this journey, with a descent off that mountain.

So we're going to join with Peter, James and John as they follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem.

And because journeys take a bit of preparation, I want to give you a heads up on what the next six Sundays are going to look like.

This journey will actually start on Wednesday, when we mark our entrance into the Lenten season by remembering that we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.

Then, over the six Sundays of Lent, we are going to join the ridiculous journey of following this nobody from nowhere, as he heads for the capital, and his final confrontation with the powers that be.

We're going to do that by reading and exploring the big stories about this country-preacher, this nobody from nowhere, as they are told to us in the Gospel of John.

In the course of doing that, we're going to visit some places we don't ordinarily go.

We're going to consider what it's like to be a woman whose life is centered on fetching water and doing the bidding of men--a woman who, in the process of doing that, likely gets some unwanted attention from these men, a woman who is also held in contempt by a whole class of people because of her race and ethnicity.

We're going to do that because this story speaks its truth into a world just like ours.

We're going to let ourselves feel what it's like to be blind, to not be able to see and enjoy the beauty and the wonders of this world, along with its hardship and its suffering.

Because sometimes that can be true of us, too. We miss the wonders and the miracles burning brightly all around us, and we turn a blind eye to the plight of our neighbors who are vulnerable or suffering, at risk or in crisis, not because we're born blind, but because we chose to be.

We're going to do that because this story speaks its truth into a world just like our own. We're going to explore what it's like to deny Christ, and to question the nature of truth, and to stand accused before the state when we've done nothing wrong.

Because these stories speak their truth into a world just like our own, where Christ is regularly denied, where the truth is now regularly on trial, and where people who have done nothing wrong are now regularly detained and stand accused before the state, prior to being deported, often to countries that unstable and actively dangerous.

Yes, these are hard stories. These are Lenten stories.

But I promise -- I promise -- that we will find the Good News in them, for in the end, they are Gospel stories. And that's the point of them, to speak the truth of God's Good News, of God's love, and mercy and grace, into a world just like ours.

All along this journey, we will take the memory of this day, this bright and glorious day, with us. So that even when these stories take a darker turn, we will remember that we are following this same Jesus, who stood on that mountain with Peter, James and John, and Moses and Elijah.

And we will remember that underneath that tender and vulnerable layer of his humanity, burns the very light of God.

*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God*

And that light is meant for us, to guide us and show the way forward, in a world just like ours.

Thanks be to God.