

## ***Transfiguration***

2 Kings 2: 1-12; Mark 9: 2-9

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### **I. Introduction**

No one's ever exactly sure of these dates but roughly the time that the magi would've been going to visit the child Jesus, at the other end of the Mediterranean, the great Roman poet, Ovid, was finishing up his magnum opus, a beautiful epic poem called *The Metamorphosis*. *The Metamorphosis* is about a 15-chapter long poem that touches on about 250 of the classic myths of the Greco-Roman world, and its primary theme is transformation, how we move from one place to another, how people are transformed. And one of the interesting characteristics of the poem is watching how Ovid moves from one story to another, tracing a character in different stories or a location between stories or a theme.

The Greek word "metamorphosis" is the word that Mark also uses in this wonderful story and a word that we have translated in most of our Bibles as transfiguration, refers to a transformation that happens in Jesus. And Transfiguration Sunday is a Sunday in which we also explore the themes of transformation and how that happens in our lives. It's also a connecting Sunday, it's a Sunday that closes out the season of Epiphany and prepares us to move into the season of Lent. Epiphany is a word that means revelation and Epiphany is the season of revelations that begins with the arrival of the magi proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah and the stories that we tell around that, it echoes the angel voices that call the shepherds to see the newborn king. And likewise, as we end Epiphany, we also hear a voice from heaven claiming Jesus as God's beloved son.

Transfiguration is the gateway into Lent which begins this Wednesday. Lent being our supreme time in the church year of penitence and preparation, of cleaning out the old stuff of our lives and getting ready to experience God's power anew in the resurrection.

We have three services this Wednesday. We'll have a 7:30 a.m. service here in the sanctuary, a 12 o'clock service over at Wesley, and a 7:30 p.m. service here in the sanctuary. It's a great way to kick off this time and I want to encourage you to join us for that.

### **II. Lent is a time apart**

This transfiguration story is also an important linking story in the Gospel of Mark. All of Mark up to this point has been Jesus healing and teaching up in Galilee, and that segment of the story ends with Jesus finally coming out and asking the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" And Peter, of course, having that wonderful gift of revelation says, "You are the Christ." And then, everything from that

point on starts shifting from this ministry in Galilee to focus on the walk to Jerusalem. , Peter declares Christ as the Messiah and Jesus immediately starts talking about the Passion and the cross and starts helping the disciples start to understand that being the Messiah is not being a triumphant warrior but about being a suffering servant.

So, immediately after that happens, Jesus takes Peter and James and John up on this mountaintop, and Mark is very explicit about saying that he took them away from the people, away from the crowds, away from even the other disciples to have a little bit of time to refocus. As they are in prayer at the top of the mountain, Jesus is transformed and joined by Moses and Elijah, and Mark tells the story in a way that echoes the mountaintop revelation that Moses had as he received the 10 Commandments, and these two greatest figures in Jewish tradition joined Jesus in conversation and the disciples appropriately are terrified by what they see.

And Peter, whose normal way of being is often to react without thinking things clearly through and often ending up with his foot in his mouth, does so again and blurts out, "It's great that we're here. We should build some booths for you all to stay in." His initial reaction, as it is frankly with many of us, is to do something, almost anything, when we're in a place of uncertainty, we've got to act. And this cloud overshadows the mountain again ala Moses' experience on Sinai and speaks to the disciples gathered there and says, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." That's a helpful word, because whenever we are uncertain, our gut impulse is always to do something like Peter, and God's reminder is that sometimes we don't have to do anything, we need to listen before we do something. We've got to stop, take a breath, and hear what the voice of God is saying to us.

Now this is obvious on some level and yet it's the thing that I think we have the hardest time doing. This is why we train people in how to listen better. Because most of us can't. Most of us, if we're engaged in a conversation, spend almost all of the time figuring out what our next words are going to be, right? We have a very, very hard time just listening, just being open.

It doesn't matter if we're listening to music. I was listening to my sermon being read to me by my iPhone on the way to church this morning and even my mind starts going, "I'm listening to myself," which is frankly profoundly interesting, right? And I can't even listen to myself. I'm thinking about other stuff. We have such a hard time listening.

And Lent is about figuring out how to listen a little better, figuring out how to strip away some of the stuff that keeps us from hearing well, how to quiet ourselves a little bit and listen for where God may be leading us. Listening when we're listening to God brings about transformation. We don't actually have to bring about transformation in the world. If we listen to God, the transformation starts to happen because it starts to happen in us. Transformation for us as individuals. Transformation for us as a community.

We're about to enter next week into a strategic planning process in which we're going to be trying to listen to where God may be calling us as a church over the next couple of years. And again, we have a hard time just listening. We come to a situation like a planning retreat with all of our agenda items, all of the things we want to see accomplished, all of the things we want to have done, all of the places we want to see our church go. That's not what the process is about. The process is about listening, listening to one another and listening for God's voice in that conversation. It's what John Wesley used to call "holy conferencing." It's when we can stop talking just long enough to hear what somebody else might be saying and what the Holy Spirit might be saying through them.

### **III. Lenten disciplines**

So, Lent is this wondrous season in which we have the opportunity to strip away some of the things that are blocking our ability to listen and the time to quiet ourselves to do a little good listening. And there are a lot of traditional disciplines that have evolved over the life of the church to help us do this. There's a whole raft of disciplines that are about giving up something, giving up the things that may cling too closely to us, giving up some of the things that feel absolutely necessary. And as we give them up, we can start to realize that maybe they are tiny bit less necessary than we thought they were.

I'm going to call all of these a group, disciplines of fasting. Fasting is a discipline in our church that historically has to do with giving up food for a period of time. But fasting as a concept is about giving up things that feel absolutely necessary to us so that we can lighten their grip on our spiritual lives. And it becomes a discipline that reminds us that our true hunger is always for the presence of God in our lives. That's what we hunger for. We try to fill that hunger up with all kinds of other stuff, but that's the hunger. And if we can allow ourselves to be actually hungry for just a moment, we can start to be reminded of the thing that we are really hungry for.

Janet Craswell and I spent most of this week quizzing people who want to be pastors, and when John Wesley did this, one of the questions John Wesley always asked people who were candidates for ministry is about their fasting discipline, and John Wesley didn't ordain anybody who didn't fast one day a week all the time. It's a discipline that we have let go in our church and I want to encourage you to take this Lent as an opportunity to figure out what your fasting might look like. If you haven't fasted before, I'm going to encourage you to not start off with a day without food. That's a hard thing to do if you haven't practiced it a bit. But it may make sense to try to leave out pieces of your diet. People leave out meat or alcohol or caffeine. Those are all things that hold tightly to us that we can let go. Maybe give up a meal on a weekly basis just to experience what real hunger feels like and be reminded of the hunger that we all have.

A lot of the fasting disciplines are around food but you can fast around anything. My daughter actually who should never fast food came up last year with this idea on

her own that she was going to fast, she was going to have a YouTube fast. Well, you know what, that's perfect for my daughter. No YouTube for 40 days. That was hard because she's very attached to it, so it's a way of letting go of that attachment. You could fast Facebook for 40 days, see what it means to let go of that. Maybe fasting from online shopping. Just a suggestion. Just throwing it out there. What are the things that you cling to tightly that you can let go for 40 days?

And I'm going to caveat this -- or not caveat but unpack it a little bit so that we're all on the same page, the 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays. Did you all know that? Sundays in the life of our church are always feast days, they're always celebration days. So, whatever your discipline is, you can take a little break on Sunday. It's just a place to let that go. So, you'll notice in our church language, we're in, for example, the seventh Sunday of Epiphany, this is the seventh Sunday of Epiphany -- next week will be not the first Sunday of Lent, it'll be the first Sunday in Lent because Lent doesn't include the Sundays. These are all the wonderful things you learn when you get to go to seminary. It's great. So, Sunday's a break, but I would like to have you think about what's something you could give up during these 40 days that might release its hold on you just a tiny bit and create the space to do some listening.

Let me also suggest that there are some wonderful disciplines to pick up during this time. You could let something go and pick something up. This is a great time of year to start a discipline of some daily prayer, if you're not already doing that. And we're going to be passing out a devotional this week, and my friend, Pat House reminded me that starting this Wednesday, there's going to be packets of little cards all over the sanctuary that are little reminders of opportunities to engage in a spiritual discipline. So, you'll find these floating around the church also over the course of the next several weeks.

One of the things that you can pick up again to attune your ear a little bit more with a little bit more awareness of God's voice. This is a great time to start doing some Bible study. We've got Bible studies every Wednesday here at Metropolitan Memorial and over at our Wesley Campus, so some great places to plug in there. And if those don't work for you, then you should come and talk to Janet and me or one of the other pastors and say, "I'd love to do a Bible study on whenever." Find a few people who might be interested in doing that and we'll set it up and try to facilitate it. We'd love to have some new Bible studies started, and this is a great time to do that.

Next Sunday we will start our Lent contemplative evening services which is a wonderful place to have some quiet, reflective, listening worship. We've got a Wednesday morning meditation group at 8:30 here in the sanctuary. If you haven't done that, that's a great discipline to engage in. And Thursday morning, we've got the men's *lectio divina* group, another wonderful opportunity to have some quiet reflective time in community. So, Lent is this wondrous opportunity to step back and reflect and create some space to listen for the voice of God.

I'm going to give you one small bit of wisdom as you engage in your Lenten disciplines. Do not walk into them with the expectation that as you engage that God is going to speak to you immediately. We live in a society that rewards immediate gratification, and so what that does is it inspires many of us to walk into or to start a prayer discipline or a meditation discipline and go in and go, "Okay. I'm ready. You can speak now. I'm listening."

We have very short attention spans and very little patience, and God almost never speaks on our schedule. God always speaks on God's schedule. And so, part of what I want to suggest to you is don't engage in a spiritual discipline and be disappointed that in that moment you don't hear the voice of God. What those spiritual disciplines do is create the space for God to speak when God is going to speak and we just need to kind of keep that in the back of our minds.

This is in part what happens in this wonderful Elijah story, when Elisha knows that Elijah is going to be taken up into heaven, he just doesn't know when or where. And in the story, they go from one significant spot in Israel to another. They start in Gilgal which is the first place that the children of Israel camped when they entered the Promised Land. It's a site of great significance for the Jewish community. It would've been a great place for God to sweep Elijah up into the heavens. That didn't happen.

And then, they go to Bethel, and Bethel of course is this very ancient worship site, it's some of the earliest worship in Israel that happened there. And that would've been a great place for God to sweep Elijah up into the heavens. It doesn't happen.

And then they go to Jericho. Well, Jericho, of course, is this wonderful place where the Israelites had their first triumph as they entered the Promised Land and defeated the people who are in the city of Jericho. Again, it's a site of great significance. It would've been just the right place for God to do something dramatic. It doesn't happen.

And then they go to the Jordan, the place where Joshua struck the water and the water parted and the people marched triumphantly into the Promised Land, a great place for a dramatic exit for Elijah. It doesn't happen there either. They finally get out into the desert in some place that has no significance at all and all of a sudden, Elijah's swept away. And Elisha, because he's persistent and waits, is there to see it happen, waiting, listening for the moment that God speaks.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Ovid's wonderful poem *The Metamorphosis* over and over again talks about the transformations that happen when we love and are loved. This is one of Ovid's recurring themes throughout all of his poetry, the power of love to transform. And the transfiguration is ultimately about a story about the power of love to transform, about the power of God's love for Christ to transform who Christ is or allow us to see who Christ is, and about the power to transform us as we clear out the rubbish that stands

between us and God that confuses our ability to hear God and to become more and more clear channels of God's love for the world so that that same transforming power that transfigured how the disciples saw Jesus starts to transfigure how people see us as we are called more and more to mirror the light of Christ to be conformed to the spirit of Christ, to become the beloved children that God has called us to be.

Amen.