

“Turn At The Light” – Mk 9:2-9 – Transfiguration Sunday

It never fails, does it? Whether planned for weeks, or happening on short notice, it always seems to happen without fail. And just what is this dreaded event that happens with great surety? I may just be a bit paranoid, but I find that every time some of my family attends a service the lectionary text for that Sunday is one of those difficult and unpreachable texts. Preach to Synod? No problem! Preach at the seminary? Piece of cake! Preach to family? Unleash the critics! And this morning fits that pattern to a ‘tee’!

The text to which I refer is of course the key gospel text selected for this particular Sunday in the church calendar – namely the account in the gospel according to Mark of the miraculous transfiguration (a fancy Latin word for ‘change in appearance’) of Jesus on the mountain.

Why is this a difficult text, or at least one that provides a great challenge to the preacher? Well, there are several reasons why, not the least of which is the obvious connection with a similar incident in the Old Testament involving Moses. The description of this event involving Jesus follows so closely the ‘Ten Commandments’ encounter between Moses and God on Mount Sinai – well, actually the two separate Ten Commandment encounters (Exo. 24 and 34), but that particular confusion and complexity wasn’t even what I had in mind – what I did have in mind is that the description of this encounter and the Mount Sinai encounter are so similar as to raise an eyebrow of suspicion. (Maybe because I’m writing papers for my ThM I’m extra cautious about plagerism, but ...)

If you recall the accounts of Moses receiving the Ten Words, you’ll note that all the elements there are echoed here – six days of waiting, a cloud that rolls in, the glorious light, the voice, the descent from the mountain, and the shining face. The minute we start to look at this event in any depth, the similarities are quickly obvious, even uncomfortably so, and we’re a bit nervous about exposing the text to a charge that the details have been shaped a little too much to reflect that earlier happening. Of course, there is always the possibility that it’s not the description of the Jesus event that so closely mirrors the Moses event, but that the events themselves were indeed so similar, reflecting perhaps that God’s attitude towards and love for and covenanting with and encountering people hadn’t changed much over the intervening two thousand or so years. Now that’s a comforting thought, isn’t it – indicating perhaps that God’s attitude towards and love for and covenanting with and encountering people still hasn’t changed much over the past two thousand years. Could it be that our understanding of God’s love as one of the rare constants in a dynamic universe is also real and true? I would say so!

Apart from the similarity issue, this text also presents one of those “trivia traps” that can lure an unsuspecting preacher down the dangerous path of irrelevancy. That ‘trap’ is the somewhat curious sidebar of Peter’s comment about building tents, or booths, or whatever dwelling thingies. It would be so easy to go off on a trivia tangent talking about ancient customs of desert dwellers, or apparent symbology of portable synagogues, or whatever, and fill half a sermon with stuff and fluff. I think there’s a much simpler meaning behind that statement, though. First, note who went along with Jesus to the mountain top – or more importantly, note how many. To save you counting, I’ll tell you the number was three: Peter and James and John. Students in the Wednesday Bible Class will hopefully remember that there were, in addition to an anonymous group of seventy elders, three named people who accompanied Moses to the mountain top. Why am I emphasizing ‘three’? Well, guess how many witnesses were needed to absolutely determine the authenticity of a legal claim in Judaism? If you guessed ‘three’ you may claim a free cup of coffee or tea in the hall following the service! And for a bonus from the treats table, how many major prophets were on that mountain top? Yes, yes, yes – three! Elijah, Moses and Jesus. Three most key witnesses to the veracity and truth of God. And then the voice, which at the baptism was directed at Jesus this time is intended for the three apostolic witnesses, affirming, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And then the silence, and only Jesus is left with the disciples. The mantle has been passed, a new light has shone upon the earth.

But perhaps the greatest challenge posed to preaching on this text is the miraculous nature of the event. We read this story, we hear the message of the divine connection between God and Jesus, and we nod and say, “yes, and ...?” We come to this text already hearing that, knowing that, believing that, and so we are somewhat underwhelmed and disconnected from the text. We are perhaps even more disconnected by the feeling or sense that this was a very special and one-time event, reserved for the elite inner core of the disciples, and thus an event that happened to other people long ago and far away and cannot or will not be replayed with us.

That sense of disconnect is unfortunate, because disconnect is exactly the opposite of what Mark intended. How do I know that? I take my clues to what Mark intended from the content and the structure of the gospel he crafted, and this event forms the mid-point, the high point, the turning point in his gospel (hence the title – “Turn At the Light”). Mark, for all his breathless ‘immediately’, and his portrayal of the disciples as bumbling dolts who just didn’t “get it”, and the whole “shhhh – Messianic Secret” theme, still paid attention to literary structure – and one of his favourites was inclusion, the ‘story-within-a-story’ technique. If we pay attention we recognize that this account of the Transfiguration occurs in the middle of the central section of Mark’s gospel (8:22-10:52). This section opens with the healing of a blind man and ends with the healing of a blind man – yet in between the disciples remain blind to who Jesus is. Three (!) times in this section Jesus predicts his death, but each time the disciples stubbornly demonstrate their inability to accept a cross and death as being part of what they understand the Messiah to mean. And yet, here the Transfiguration stands clearly between the first prediction of the Passion, and the Passion of Christ.

Mark signals the importance and meaning of this event for us, and our connection with the miraculous happenings, not only by where he places this account in his gospel but also with the closing comment of Jesus to his disciples, a comment we often either don’t hear, or mis-hear, or ignore. If we hear that at all, we tend to hear the “tell no one” part, and miss the conditional clause – “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” We hear that instruction as a knock-off, a throw-away. To the disciples that statement would have been only confusing, with no clear meaning at all – at least until after the resurrection of Jesus, when the full and stunning impact would have come clear, the affirmation of what they had heard on that mountain top.

For the moment, however, everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed. It is down off the mountain and back among the people, teaching and preaching, listening and forgiving and healing, all the while progressing toward that last mountain to climb – a hill with a cross. This key turning point in the ministry of Jesus, this turning at the light on the mountain reflects in a very real way where we are in the church year, and in our own faith journey. This is the ‘turning point’ between Epiphany and Lent, between the celebration of the birth and revelation of Jesus in Bethlehem, and the death and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. This event offers us a sign that says “turn at the light – to find Hope”.

As we plod along in our own faith journeys, experiencing highs and lows, feeling as confused and bewildered as the disciples, trying to make sense of what it all means, longing for a King-like Messiah to come riding in on a huge white charger laying the sword to our enemies and our foes and raising us up victorious, this miraculous episode is a reminder to turn at the light, to recall that the path to encounter and reconciliation with God is shown in the light of Christ, victorious not with sword and brimstone but with sacrificial, death-overwhelming, life-restoring love.

Yes, this is a challenging text, until we are able to see it as a sign and a sign-post, a defining moment in the on-going story of God’s compassion and love, a love offered so completely and freely in the death and resurrection of the one declared as Son, even our Lord, Jesus Christ.