

“Mountaintop Highs” – Mk 9:2-9 – Transfiguration Sunday

There are many advantages to following a lectionary – a commonly shared set of scripture readings. We tend to use the Revised Common Lectionary, which provides suggested readings for each Sunday over a three-year period. Some of the advantages include coordination between the worship service and Sunday School and easier planning for choirs and liturgists. Incorporating the readings from the lectionary also tends to keep the preacher from over-using favourite “hobby-horse” texts.

However, there is one disadvantage from a preacher’s perspective, and that is that from time to time the lectionary serves up one of those difficult and un-preachable texts. 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.

If you recall the accounts of Moses receiving the Ten Words, you’ll note that all the elements found 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 symbolism 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 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.

We could be left with the impression that Jesus is now the equal of Elijah and Moses, but we are moved beyond that understanding by the voice. At his baptism the voice was directed at Jesus alone but this time it is intended for the three apostolic witnesses, affirming, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Then follows a crashing silence, and Elijah and Moses are gone - only Jesus is left with the disciples. The mantle has been passed, a new light has shone upon the mountaintop, and 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, so ...?” We come to this text already hearing that message, already knowing and believing the connection between Jesus and God, 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 I note that this mountain-top event forms the mid-point, the high point, the turning point in his gospel. 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 favourite techniques was inclusion, the ‘story-within-a-story’ technique. If we pay attention we recognize that this account of the Transfiguration occurs right 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 actual 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.

This key turning point in the ministry of Jesus, this mountaintop high, reflects in a very real way where we are in the church year, and perhaps even in our own faith journey. In the church year today 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. I suspect all of us are at least familiar with the concept of a mountaintop high, even if we have not experienced one ourselves. Those of us with a bit of seasoning will remember John Denver’s song “Rocky Mountain High” expressing some of the feelings and sentiments. We see commercials such as the recent Lotto 649 one showing a group of women gathering for a sunrise

breakfast on the peak of a mountain. I can still clearly remember my first time at age four looking down on clouds from the old Kicking Horse pass highway and the exhilarating excitement that day that still stays with me every time I fly.

But we do not live on mountain tops ... these experiences are transient. Even in the gospel account everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed. For Jesus, and the disciples, and for us the time comes to come down off the mountain and move 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.

And so what do we take away from this curious and somewhat confusing little episode? An affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah, on a par with Moses and Elijah? Well, yes, but even more, as the voice reminds us that Jesus is akin to and one with God. A testimony to the holiness of Jesus? Certainly, witnessed not only by three named individuals but also by his continuing ministry of teaching and preaching and healing, and affirmed by his death and resurrection, at which time those witnesses were freed to tell the story. Once again we are affirmed in the ups and downs of our lives that Christ has gone before us, and by the grace of God the risen Christ will continue to be with us not only in our mountaintop highs but more importantly in the lows and valleys of life as well.