

WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY

Mark 9:2-9 (Transfiguration Sunday)

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany and the Sunday which sets the stage upon which the drama of Lent will be played out. Each year on this Sunday we go on a brief spiritual retreat up the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John. This year the gospel writer, Mark, is our host.

In Mark's version of this story Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray and takes with him Peter, James and John, the inner circle of the disciples. When he comes back down at the end of the story, he will begin what scholars have called the dash to Calvary. His eye will be set upon Jerusalem and the cross and nothing will be allowed to distract him from that path.

So, it is important for us to focus upon and spend some time on that mountain top with Jesus and the three disciples to see what it is that happens up there so we can better understand that which follows.

Mark's version of the story is brief, straightforward, and a little humorous. Quite frankly, to the degree that it is possible to do so, Mark plays this story for laughs.

So, up the mountain we go.

UP THE MOUNTAIN

Because we are students of Scripture, we know that big things happen when you go up a mountain, whether it's Horeb, Sinai, Nebo, Carmel, Zion, or the Mount of Olives. If you're going up a mountain, hold onto your hat; something important is likely to happen.

Noah's saga ended on a mountain. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses on a mountain. God was said to have lived, at one time, on a mountain. Elijah witnessed the whirlwind and heard God's still, small voice on a mountain. David hid from Saul in the mountains. And Jerusalem was built on a large hill but the ancient Hebrews called it a mountain, Mt. Zion, to give it prominence and a sense of importance.

So, important things tend to happen on mountains and we are not disappointed in this story.

Jesus asks Peter and his friends to stop just short of the summit while he goes to the top alone to pray and from their spot below the top they see him with Moses and Elijah transfigured and glowing white. What we are not told is whether Jesus is actually with Moses and Elijah or whether Peter, James and John are sharing an ecstatic vision. The text says, that Jesus was transfigured before them, that is, changed in appearance, so that his clothing glowed whiter than any bleach could bleach them. And then it says that "there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus." That is, they saw what appeared to be Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus.

Whether or not these things actually happened we do not know. Jesus never so much as mentions what happened at the top of that mountain.

All we know is that this is what Peter, James, and John saw and modern behavioral science tells us that eye witness accounts are among the least reliable.

Perhaps you are familiar with the classic Japanese movie, “Rashomon.” Released in 1950 and the winner of a special Academy Award that was invented specifically for this film, it tells the story of a violent crime and the trial that follows. A samurai has been killed and his wife molested in the woods along a well-traveled road. A notorious bandit has been accused of the crime and, at the trial we hear the story of what happened as it is recounted by four people who were all there and witnessed the events: the bandit, a woodcutter, the woman, and the dead samurai who speaks through a medium.

While each person witnessed exactly the same events their versions of the story are so different and so tainted by other parts of their lives, their past experiences and prejudices, that one wonders if they are talking about the same things.

So powerful was this film that social scientists, today, actually speak of what they call the “Rashomon Effect” wherein eye witnesses give radically different accounts of a phenomenon and refuse to allow that they might be in error.¹

Since we are told today’s story from Peter’s point of view and Jesus never speaks of it, it is possible that we are getting just one version of the story, Peter’s version which he fervently believed was true and later recounted to Mark. At any rate, Peter does believe that what he is seeing is Jesus, glowing white, with Moses and Elijah.

In the church we would say that this is probably an ecstatic vision. It finds its source in the supernatural and is of a type that is only allowed to a very few, privileged people.

In short, Peter is allowed, either literally or figuratively, to stand in the presence of the two of the greatest, historic patriarchs of their religion. He is invited to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime transformational transcendent experience.

And, as is usually the case in Mark’s gospel, he doesn’t get it. Let’s take a look at his response.

EVERYONE’S A CRITIC

His **first** response is to offer an evaluation: You know, “it’s good that we are here.” The fact that he is right does nothing to alter the absurdity of what he says.

Who does he think that he is? Siskel and Ebert? Does he think he was brought here to write a review? To judge the value of the event?

But he’s not all that different than the contemporary church goer, is he?

¹ The Japanese film “Rashomon” was remade in an American version, “The Outrage,” set in the old west, directed by Martin Ritt and featuring Paul Newman, Lawrence Harvey, Claire Bloom, Edward G. Robinson, and William Shatner. The screenplay was written by Fay and Michael Kanin from their stage version of “Rashomon” and Akira Kurosawa, who directed the Japanese version of the film.

We come to church, presumably to worship the transcendent God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, to experience the awe and wonder of the infinite mystery and the creative force and majesty that is the living God. And, what do we do? We critique the service as though it was an evening at the theater.

“Loved the music but thought the sermon lacked punch.”

“Opened strong but tended to fade in the third act.”

“Loved him. Hated her.” I’d give it three and a half stars.” “C+, maybe a B-.”

And please don’t think that I’m picking on lay people. We ministers are some of the worst offenders. We go to church and if we have to actually sit in the pews, we don’t know what to do with ourselves. Ask Jean, she’ll tell you that I’m terrible. I fidget, I fuss, I squirm, I let my mind wander, and then I critique the service, especially the sermon.

It takes an act of will to keep from comparing the way the preacher preached to the way I would have preached.

We Americans have come to value our worship experiences the way we value our entertainment experiences. We grade them on the same scale according to how entertaining they were. The worst sin in the world that a preacher can commit on Sunday morning is to let his parishioners get bored for even the briefest moment.

The liturgy must crackle, the music must pop, the sermon must entertain and delight and be accompanied by audio-visuals, and dead air is to be avoided at all costs.

Well, Peter is just like us. He is provided an opportunity to experience the presence of God in an up close and personal way and, instead, he decides to evaluate the presentation.

MAINTAINING A SAFE DISTANCE

Secondly, after he gives his evaluation, Peter offers to build three tabernacles, shelters -- one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses. Why? Because...

A.) It’s the polite thing to do. B.) It’s the religious thing to do. And C.) It’s the safe thing to do.

And, again, Peter betrays himself to be a modern man. Faced with a transcendent experience of possibly life altering significance, his first impulse is to **do** something and not just anything but something “religious.”

If the story was set today, he would probably organize a pot-luck dinner, or get out his guitar and write a contemporary Christian song, or maybe even write a bestselling book. Or, even more likely he would use our modern equivalent of three tabernacles: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Can't you just hear him in today's vernacular? "Lord, it is way cool that we are here. Pardon me for just a minute while I tweet about it and (click) post this picture of it on Facebook." Then, to John: "Tell me you got that on video! It'll get a million hits on YouTube."

That's one of the big problems with social media, isn't it? It takes people who used to be participants and turns them into observers. They don't so much participate in life as observe it and comment on it. I have watched parents sit through an entire commencement exercise and never remove the camera from their eye. I have watched teenagers sitting at the base of the Christmas tree, tweeting their friends about their Christmas gifts even as they open them. I have sat in churches that pulled a screen down in front of the cross so the congregation could see a Power Point version of the sermon as the minister preached it because the spoken word is no longer entertaining enough for modern people.

And we have all seen people use "religious busyness" as a means of avoiding Jesus Christ. They are the first ones to volunteer in the kitchen or the nursery, the first ones to serve on committees, to paint the parlor, to go to a meeting. But they just can't seem to shake lose 60 minutes of their week to worship God.

The sub purpose of Peter's three shelters and our social media and church busyness is, of course, to trivialize the transcendent, to make it small, to bring it down to a level where it isn't really transcendent any more, where I can experience it and enjoy it without having it make a new demand on my life.

And the funny thing is that this stuff is all quite understandable.

FEAR AND TREMBLING ON THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

We understand perfectly why Peter wants to shrink this whole thing down into an easily manageable package, don't we? But just in cases we need a clue, Mark then tells us why Peter is acting the way he is. It's not because he is stupid or shallow or deceitful or anything bad, but because he is afraid, terrified...and he doesn't know what to say.

Like many Christians, today, when Peter is confronted with awe and mystery and doesn't know what to say he talks in the hope that if he says a lot of things one of them will be the right thing. His rule seems to be that, if you say enough stuff, the right stuff might fall out of your mouth.

We have all experienced this, haven't we? Or we have at least witnessed it. A tragedy happens and a Christian person finds themselves in a situation where they don't know what to say so they say something that they hope will sound religious, something they've heard someone else say, some axiom or cliché that they haven't really thought about but sounds kind of good, something generic and bland and kind of meaningless, something harmlessly religious.

We hear them say it and we nod and then, after we've had a chance to think about it, we realize that we've just committed blasphemy, we've accused God of doing something so

horrible that, if a human being did it, we would throw that human being in prison for the rest of their life.

It is the fear of committing this kind of *faux pas* that keeps us from going to the bedside of someone who is ill, or to the visitation at the funeral home, or to the jail. We don't know what to say and we are afraid we'll say the wrong thing.

Many good Christian folk refuse to teach Sunday school or Vacation Bible School or even lead an adult discussion group for that same reason. I have even heard it used as an excuse for not going to a Bible Study: "I don't even know what I don't know and I'm afraid I'll say something wrong and make a fool of myself."

Peter can't not go up the mountain; he's already there. Suddenly confronted by the power and glory of the transcendent God, he is surprised, shocked and afraid. And his response to this experience is to say something that he hopes will sound religious, and to offer to do something that he believes is a religious thing to do.

Maybe that will shrink it a little and make it less scary, more accessible.

And let's face it, folks, these kinds of experiences are fearsome. God can be kind of scary. That's what the children of Israel discovered in the 4th chapter of Deuteronomy. They didn't trust Moses. They wanted to hear God's voice for themselves. But all God did was clear his throat and they ran away and cowered behind trees and told Moses that they had changed their minds and they would trust him to actually do the talking with God.

The Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories that make God seem dangerous. People touch the Ark of the Covenant and drop dead. Priests break the rules of handling this or that holy item and they die. God's presence always seems to be accompanied by whirlwinds, and brush fires, and gale force winds, and thunder and lightning.

We think of the New Testament as less scary, filled with stories of love and acceptance, but is it, really?

Jesus tells us to love our enemies. I don't know about you but that seems kind of scary to me. What if the enemies don't love us back?

Jesus tells the rich young man to "sell everything you own and give it to the poor and come, follow me." And I'm hoping that story is metaphorical, you know? Because that "sell all you own and give it to the poor" stuff is really scary to me.

And if all that isn't scary enough, what's this about "take up your cross and follow me," and the "first shall be last," and "if you have two coats, give one of your coats to your neighbor?" You start taking that stuff seriously and things get heavy and scary really fast.

No wonder Peter has decided that it's just a lot easier to say religious sounding things and do religious looking stuff than to actually let your life be addressed by the living God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

QUIET, PLEASE!

Thankfully, God doesn't let this go on unchecked.

God steps in and stops Peter before he really does make a fool of himself. God causes a cloud to overshadow Peter, James and John and from the cloud comes this deep, resonant, baritone voice. (I think we can all agree that God has a baritone voice, can't we?)

Since those present can't figure out the proper response to this experience, God lays it out for them in simple, straightforward terms. Mark gives us a brief homily, a mini-sermon delivered straight from the mouth of God.

First, the indicative: "This is my Son, the Beloved."

Jesus is a great teacher of morals and ethics but he is not JUST a teacher. He is a healer of the sick but he is not JUST a healer. He is a Jewish religious reformer but he is not JUST a religious reformer. He is the Son, the beloved of God.

Now, to you and me that may work as a nice, cozy metaphor – you know, the father and son thing. But to first century Jews that phrase, "Son of God" was about the long-awaited messiah.

God says to Peter, "Peter, please! Stop babbling. Stop running around. Put those rocks down and come over her. Sit down. This man is my son, the messiah, the one you've been waiting for all your life."

Then comes the imperative: "Listen to him!" (Exclamation point)

And there it is in three simple words.

This is the appropriate response that we are instructed to bring to this moment. This is how we are supposed to respond to Jesus Christ on the mountaintop. This is the religious activity in which we are to be engaged. This is what it means to be Christian.

"Listen to Him."

Listen to him when he says, "Pick up your bed and walk."

Listen to him when he says, "Follow me."

Listen to him when he says, "In as much as ye do it to the least of these..."

Listen to him when he says, "Love your enemies."

Listen to him ... well, just listen to him.

And I am reminded, at this point of my old Seminary Professor, Van Bogard (Bogey) Dunn, who used to tell us that, "seein' and listenin' in the Bible ain't got nothin' to do with eyeballs and eardrums." It's got to do with the deepest, most important, innermost part of each of us. It's got to do with our souls. Listening to Jesus is soul listening.

And that, brothers and sisters, is what we're going to do for the next six weeks.

For the season of Lent, we are going to be listening to Jesus. Really listening.

I sincerely hope you'll join us.

AMEN