

2.14.2021

Transfiguration Sunday

Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church

Good morning, our second reading today is from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, verses 2-9. This translation is from the Common English Bible. Listen now, for the Word of the Lord, “**2** Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, **3** and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. **4** Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. **5** Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Rabbi, it’s good that we’re here. Let’s make three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **6** He said this because he didn’t know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified.

7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, “This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!” **8** Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead.” ((This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.))

I have three questions for you today. The first question is “How do we understand the event of Jesus’s transfiguration?” The second question is “How do we understand the silence that is requested?” And finally, “Where can we see God’s love in silence and in transfiguration?”

How do we understand the transfiguration?

For this first question, there are many options, we can simply look at this as a historical marker in the book of Mark. We can look at the story of the transfiguration as a paradigm to our own mountain top experiences. or, finally, we could look at this text as a bunch of examples of how and why Jesus is the Human One, the Son of Man. Personally, I like this story as a paradigm to our own mountaintop experiences. I don’t want to assume that anyone has experienced this exact situation that the disciples have found themselves in. But, I imagine that we have all had something we can understand as a “mountaintop experience.” Often our youth will explain that this is Montreat to them. Or a particularly moving night of a mission trip. I’ve heard adults tell me that their mountaintop experiences came during a moment away from everything else that they were able to feel truly centered. I want you to take a moment to think about that moment for you? When did you feel the most connected to God, to your faith, and to your self through the Holy Spirit? Truly think about it, I’ll even stop talking for a moment.

Was a smile brought to your face? Did you get a little feeling of excitement? Did you feel like you wanted to go back to that moment when everything seemed to be possible and stretch before you? Hold onto that feeling. Truly sit in it for a bit while you think about what this event meant to the disciples who were with Jesus up on that mountain- Peter, James, and John. These disciples weren't on a middle school retreat, they weren't at a weekend getaway or a church retreat though. They were simply living life and being in relationship with their friend and their teacher, Jesus.

This event can seem confusing in the middle of our Christian Calendar. We are preparing for Ash Wednesday and for Lent to begin. And we can't forget where Mark has placed this story in the gospel. Simply ten verses ago, in Mark 8:31, Jesus has predicted his death for the first time. Now, he is taking three of his disciples up the mountain, to be alone together. This is only six days after that prediction. I imagine the disciples were simultaneously trying to understand what he had said while also questioning if they even understood in the first place. How could their friend just die? What was going to happen? If he was truly as connected to the divine as they had seen and as they believed, surely he would be right about this. And suddenly, all at once, they were facing the grief and fighting to understand what was going to happen. No matter what the mountain top experience that you had is, I imagine it didn't immediately follow a prediction of your friend (and let's not forget your Savior's) death.

Jesus predicted his death, the disciples are questioning everything, and now they are watching Jesus shine the brightest white they've ever seen. No one was even able to bleach something to be as bright as Jesus's clothes were. This whole event, including the prediction of his death, can be read as a look backward, and a look forwards within the same experience. The bright white clothing, and being seen with the other liberators of the Old Testament, he can be seen as the resurrected Christ. But surely, as the disciples want to believe, he won't really die. He will make it through to continue teaching and everything will be okay. Then, they hear the booming voice of God. "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him." We think back to the moment that Jesus was baptized by John. So, when he tells them to keep this to themselves on their way down the mountain, how could they disobey. Suddenly, everything he is telling them is thrown into stark contrast in making sure they are truly hearing what he is saying, to make sure they are listening. I think that one of the important things to understand about the transfiguration is that Jesus asks for the disciple's silence.

It may seem strange to us that silence was required immediately following this huge event for the disciples. But think about it, how did you feel immediately following your mountaintop experience. Did you feel like people would understand that life-changing event for you? Did you feel like it made complete sense? The chances are no. So, you went from that mountaintop into the valley, just like the disciples. And we can't stay on the mountaintop. We are called back into the valley. We have to keep silent for a little bit while we work to understand what happened to us up there on the mountain top.

So, how do we understand the silence that is requested?

There is an interesting thread all through the book of Mark where Jesus is incredibly focused on not being known yet. Maybe you've caught this as you've been listening to scripture the last couple of weeks. A lot of the Mark passages end in a variation of "he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen" for example, the original ending of the book of Mark, Mark 16: 8 states, "Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone- because they were afraid." Silence is a huge part of the book of Mark. This silence is always requested by Jesus or followed by the disciples who are trying to follow what Jesus has said in the past.

In addition to the silence, there is terror in our New Testament passage. We hear that specifically in Mark 9:6 "[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified." I imagine Peter tripping over his words on top of the mountain. He looks up, and where he saw his friend moments before, he now sees three people. Have you ever been terrified, and you just start word vomiting to try to fill the space and talk through your fear, and maybe if you just keep talking, you'll feel less afraid, and then no one will notice how scared you are? That is how I imagine Peter on top of the mountain, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." To go straight from that experience into Jesus telling them, "Don't tell anyone about this until after the Son of Man is raised from the dead," I imagine that was a bit of a whiplash moment for Peter, James, and John.

And how are we supposed to understand the silence that has been requested by Jesus? The disciples have experienced this incredible thing, and yet they are asked not to say anything. But we don't only hear of silence in the New Testament reading today. We also hear it in the Old Testament. "Yes, I know. Keep silent." "Yes, I know. Be silent." Elisha is asking for a few more moments of time with his mentor, his teacher- Elijah. Everyone, even Elijah himself is trying to separate them. But Elisha keeps saying, I know. I know he is leaving me. But I'm not ready yet. Stop reminding me. Please, be silent. The whole passage is a journey for the two of them and Elisha isn't ready for it to be over yet. He needs just one more stop, just one more place with Elijah. But finally, Elijah is taken in this whirlwind, into heaven. Let's remember just for a moment that Elijah has found God in the silence before. First Kings, chapter 19, verses 11-13. This is the Common English Bible translation. Listen, "**11** The Lord said, "Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by." A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the Lord. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord wasn't in the earthquake. **12** After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the Lord wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. **13** When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave's entrance. A voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

Surely, we know this sound. I imagine that Elijah had told his student, Elisha about this exact moment. The sound of God's voice in the silence, God's love in silence. Maybe that is what Elisha is asking for in the second Kings passage. Maybe that is what Jesus is asking from his disciples in the Mark passage.

While we hear of silence, we also see a stunning relationship between the teacher and the student in these passages. The relationships we read are not simply between teachers and students. They are not of prophets and disciples. They are relationships of love between people who hold a specific intimacy of learning and existing as humans together. These relationships are ones that you can't fake. You can't just stumble into these relationships. They take work. These relationships take mutual care for each other. In the simplest of terms, they take Love. I hope you didn't think we were going to get out of church today without talking about Love.

Where can we see God's love in silence and in transfiguration?

It is often hard to see Love in silence. It's hard to see Love when something is scary and we are talking too fast to try to process our experience before we are truly understanding what is happening. It is difficult to see Love when someone we care deeply for is leaving us for one reason or another. And yet, we know Love is there. And we know that because we know *God* is there.

I'm sure you've seen Love all around you this week. Not just in your relationships, though that is important, but I also mean on Facebook, news shows, or your student's homework. I know the kids I nanny for have had to make a valentine in just about every class this week. Today is, of course, Valentine's Day. A day to celebrate love. I was reading a book this week and a quote popped out at me, "Love is not something you think about, it is a state in which you dwell." This is the perfect explanation of where we see God's love in silence and in the transfiguration of Christ. We know God has shown up in silence before, not just in the booming voice from the sky. We know there was love between the friends on the mountain, that where love is, God is there. We can't always understand it because we are too close, we see the big event rather than the small intimacy. We hear "be silent" instead of "I love you." And we feel terrified instead of feeling the love around us. God's love isn't about the big event of understanding the transfiguration of Jesus. God's love is felt in the moments coming down from the mountain when we are with the people who care most for us, and when we are waiting for the smallest voice in the silence, and when we feel the grief and confusion when we lose someone we love deeply. Those mountaintop experiences are fundamental to our growth. But the valley is fundamental too. God's love is found in the big events and in the silence. We learn from every experience, and we work to understand that God's love is bigger than any experience valley, mountaintop, booming voice, or silence.

Please pray with me,

God of silence, and big events-

We ask you today to help us see your love above all else in this world. When we are overwhelmed with fear, or when everything around us seems silent, or when we feel like something is slipping away from us, remind us that your love is bigger than all of that. And that we are never alone because you're constantly present with us. Help us reach out to one another and be your love in the world. In your most holy and wonderful name, Amen.