

Riverside United Church

February 11, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Mark 8: 27- 9: 8

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

28And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Chapter 9

And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

2Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

4And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

6He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

8Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Not Knowing What to Say"

Have you ever been speechless? Have you ever had the experience of just not knowing what to say? Such a moment may be prompted by wonder or awe, by shock or sadness, by disappointment or confusion, by love or joy. There are moments when we are overwhelmed and need time to process what is happening.

There are times when life offers us profound moments and our response has not - can not have been anticipated or rehearsed, and we don't know how to respond, what to say.

And that is okay. That is very much a part of our human experience. It needs to be part of our human experience. If we lose the ability to wonder, to live in mystery, to be moved to tears, anger or joy, to realize the moments when all we have is sighs too deep for words, then we have diminished the fullness of our humanity - as creatures made in the image of the divine.

Today, in our story from the gospel of Mark, there is a lot happening in terms of the deepening the journey for the disciples. I am not going to spend much time on the important words following Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" We will hear that reading again in a few weeks as we move off the Narrative Lectionary for Lent. What I do want to focus on is the experience on the mountain as Jesus takes with him Peter, James and John - and they experience glory - the divine in dazzling images that are hard to explain or describe or understand. In the vision, Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah - and the disciples are left speechless.

It is story of glory - on the mountain top with clouds and dazzling white visions. The glory of this story may fade in our rational and logical mind set. This story is rich in symbolism and the presence of Moses and Elijah would have been a powerful sign of the stature of Jesus. He is in the company of these great figures of the Hebrew narrative.

We are not a culture that pays a lot of attention to mystery and to glory. We tend to ascribe glory to popular people, to human accomplishments. As we ponder the story of transfiguration this day, many in our continent and world are preparing for the high holy day of the Super Bowl. The game is in Las Vegas this evening and the airports near Las Vegas do not have enough parking spots for all the private jets that want to book a spot. The economics of this game - 60 minutes of football - is beyond my scale of thinking. While there will be 60 minutes of football, many will be watching for the halftime show and the commercials on television. Often the game itself is not a very exciting football game - rarely meeting the hype of expectation and it being the championship.

If our societal sense of glory is tied to scheduled events, money and popularity, success and fame - than we will generate terrible results of jealousy, of not measuring up, of great discrepancies of value and worth and ultimately a very shallow sense of who we are as individuals and community.

The trio of disciples on the mountain were left lost in wonder, love and praise. And they didn't know what to do next - and that is part of the gift and message of this story.

One of those disciples is Peter and we are going to spend some time over the next couple of months getting to know Peter better as we explore the stories of his path of following Jesus. The resource that we will be using is entitled A Wandering Heart: Figuring Out Faith with Peter. The gospels include a lot of stories where Peter is the featured disciple and his growth in faith and understanding is not a straight line up the mountain; his understanding and courage wanders around as he sorts out who is and what he is becoming.

In the reading today, he has the insight and courage to respond to Jesus' question about who do you say that I am with the declaration, You are the Christ. We will dive deeper into this story in a couple of weeks. And then on the mountain - he is so engulfed by the glory that he suggests that they build shelters and stay awhile. The narrator says that he didn't know what to say. There was reluctance to go off the mountain and into the next phase of the story.

The story of the transfiguration has never been a favourite of mine partly because it is unexplainable. It is on the mystical end of the faith continuum and I live more on the practical end of the continuum. However, I do see the importance of the story in the narrative of Jesus and in the quest for seeking to interpret meaning of life and discipleship.

As a culture we have been trained to think that living happily ever after is a possibility. We see images of imagining and dreaming of living in luxury and without worry. That is the vision of glory in our consumer god society. There are different visions of mountain top experiences and the biblical ones are not all fun and relaxation. The word for awe is also translated as fear and so the biblical sense of mountains and of glory is always transformative. Encounters with the Holy change the character. And so we see why it is tempting for Peter to want to stay on the mountain.

But the biggest challenge for Peter and the challenge for each us is to find our way from the mountain and back into the plain, the routine and ordinary way of living. How do we translate profound experiences of wonder, of glory, of love, of hope into the routines and confused priorities of the world? The vision of the Holy, the clarity of purpose, the intimacy of love will not always be clear. But, we are invited to hold that memory and hope of the mystical vision and mysterious wonder within our mind and soul so that we will not forget that we are invited to live deeper into our humanity as we live amidst the ordinary which can be pretty shallow and unsatisfying.

Over the past couple of months, my office has had a transformation and it is taking me awhile to settle back in. The unpacking my office “find of the week” was a CD by Rita MacNeil. It is one of her earliest recordings and I had forgotten that I had it in CD form. The CD is entitled, *Part of the Mystery*, and that title song has profound lyrics in its chorus:

Did you ever feel like the wick in a candle,
part of the question and part of the answer.
Part of the mystery far greater than me or you.

As this Epiphany season ends, we continue to cherish the gift of light and revelation into our world. We move into the wilderness of Lent with the image that we are like the wick in the candle, partners in creating light and part of the mystery far greater than me or you.

This transition of season from Epiphany to Lent, within our faith story reminds us that we need the sense of mystery, the moments of being lost in wonder, love and praise, so that we can live into the confusion, pain and reflection of Lent. Peter did not know what to say. And that is a helpful reminder as we live our lives. We are invited into those profound times of sadness, of wonder, of anger at injustice, of joy - with an assurance that our faithfulness is not dependent on words, but a deeper sense of purpose, hope and peace.

And when we are able to speak, to respond, may our words - offer gratitude, build community, deepen humanity, address injustice and nurture hope. Amen.