

“A Glimpse”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Mark 8:22-9:8

February 23, 2020 - Transfiguration Sunday

The Transfiguration of Jesus is this wild story that we tell each year. It appears in the three synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — with variations. It’s a weird and mysterious event that is best told in context. And so we’re going to hear about Transfiguration, and more. Listen for the good news from the Gospel according to Mark:

[Jesus and the disciples] came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.” 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?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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

He 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. For 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those 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.” 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.”

Six 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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

My high school had a nice big gym. But, nestled into one New York City block, we didn't have soccer or softball or baseball fields of our own. We didn't have a football team, which didn't stop us from making oh-so-clever "Hunter Football" t-shirts. Our outdoor sports teams, and our P.E. classes that needed more space, were forced to walk a few blocks to a nearby park — which just happened to be Central Park.

One fall day, my gym class was making the journey to a field where we planned to play flag football when the teacher and the students carrying all the equipment suddenly froze, causing a pileup on the path. "Hi, Al!" one of my classmates yelled.

There he was, in head-to-toe gray sweats with a big towel around his neck and a trainer at his side — TV weatherman Al Roker. He gave a big wave and wheezed, "Hi...kids!"

One of the strange things about growing up in New York City is that you occasionally have a celebrity sighting like this one. It's one thing if you happen upon a TV show or a film shoot, or if you meet a ballplayer outside the stadium or a politician kissing babies outside a subway station. The really fun part is when you bump into someone famous at the pharmacy or at a bookstore or when they're doing their laps in Central Park.

Meeting a celebrity "in the wild" has a completely different feel. They are out of place, doing something "normal." You get a quick look into their world behind their fame. You briefly see them for who they really are — and that sight can be wonderfully endearing or terribly disappointing. You get a glimpse — not the full picture, but something you hadn't seen before. It's like seeing people for the first time, but they look like trees, walking.

Inquiring Messiahs want to know — *Who do people say that I am?*

Theories abound, but Jesus quickly moves on:

But who do you say that I am?

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

The Messiah. The Anointed One. The Christ.

Peter and company have seen something in their time with him. They are getting a picture.

But it's fuzzy.

The Messiah — but I don't think that word means what you think it means!

And Jesus teaches them about suffering and rejection and being killed and rising again.

This is what must happen, don't you see? This world is obsessed with violence and unable to take a holy "Yes!" for an answer. This world doesn't want to be woken from the slumber of injustice.

And so when truth and peace and grace are embodied, they will be betrayed and put through the ringer and rejected and, when they persist as they must, they will need to be put down.

To be pierced. To be suffocated. To be put away. To be buried.

And when the world does what it must — and because God is obsessed with showing us the kind of love that makes everything go fuzzy, the kind of love that confounds us and reminds us that resilience is in our DNA — truth and peace and grace, embodied, must rise again.

That's what that word means, Peter.

Peter rebukes Jesus.

And Jesus rebukes Peter and tells him that his mind is not on divine things, but human things. And let's hold onto that idea, because it's about to get flipped on poor Peter.

Jesus tells the crowd that in order to follow him they must take up their cross. They have to accept that there is a piece in the empire's arsenal for them. They have to see the world as it is — brutal and violent in the midst of its immense beauty — if they are to transform it. What is a life worth if it is spent in fear, denying both the heart-filling and heart-breaking nature of love?

We skip ahead six days, in which we might imagine Jesus and the disciples had lots of lighthearted banter about this whole cross and death and resurrection thing. And then he takes Peter and James and John... and let's stop for a second here and wonder where we heard that trio getting pulled apart from the rest before.

Ah, yes, it was a few chapters ago when Jesus went to the home of the synagogue leader whose daughter had died. Jesus took Peter and James and John along with the girl's parents into the house to hear him tell her to get up and to see her stand and eat.

There will be one more time in this gospel that Jesus will take Peter and James and John apart from the rest. It will be in the garden at Gethsemane. He will tell the other disciples to sit while he goes to pray. He will then confide to the three that he is "deeply grieved, even to death" and then he will tell the three to keep awake while he goes farther into the garden to ask God for it to go another way. He will return to find them asleep. When Peter and James and John are pulled aside, they are offered a glimpse, but they are only able to see what they can see.

He takes Peter and James and John up on a high mountain, where we know from our scripture that holy things happen. His visible nature is changed, all dazzling brightness, better than OxiClean could ever achieve. And they see Elijah and Moses, the most important prophets in Israel's history and figures that would evoke a sense that something cosmic and eternal was happening.

Peter tries hard here to focus on the "divine things" he sees before him and suggests they just make camp up here on this mountaintop and turn it into heavenly festival grounds.

Wrong again, Pete. They have to go back down to where the human things are. They head back down to the trouble. They head back down to the rejection and the suffering. And we are at a turning point in Mark's story. From here, Jesus will take the path that leads to the death that he predicted and will predict

again.

As we walk with Peter and James and John through the rest of this gospel we can wonder what they will see when they close their eyes at night:

The dazzling light flashing in their eyes.

The mysterious transfiguration.

The air around them shimmering as they hear “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” thundering in their ears.

They have gotten a glimpse of what is really going on here. They don’t understand it, but they have seen it. They have received new clarity about who Jesus is. Just for an instant they have been able to see beyond the blurry trees to the heart of the matter.

What a privilege.

What a burden.

2020 has been hard on many in our congregation so far. We have lost loved ones and gotten hard news and watched as the news of the world has been bleak and unkind to the most vulnerable.

I cannot promise you that we’re in for smooth sailing the rest of the way.

But I know that on Wednesday night in this sanctuary we will put ashes on our foreheads and turn our attention to the cross and ask God for a glimpse of something dazzling amid the ashes and dust.

We are on this path together, y’all, so if you see something, say something.

I have a dear friend in Anchorage, Alaska who will send emails with nothing but hilarious stories and pictures and videos of the things her brilliant and fascinatingly weird kids say and do.

Thanks be to God.

If you get a glimpse of joy, share it.

If you see the indication of a break in the clouds, jump up and down and point.

If you get a peak behind the sacred curtain and it sends a chill up your spine, grasp the closest hand and give thanks and let what you have seen transfigure you.

Even if what you see is blurry and you can’t quite make out the edges, ask someone to take a look at it and see what they see.

For this is how we follow. Amen.