

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Psalm 50:1-6
Mark 9:2-9

The Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Kings 2:1-12

Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.” But Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he said, “Yes, I know; keep silent.”

Elijah said to him, “Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, “Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?” And he answered, “Yes, I know; be silent.”

Then Elijah said to him, “Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.” But he said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” So

the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Psalm 50:1-6 Page 654, BCP

Deus deorum

- 1 The LORD, the God of gods, has spoken;
 he has called the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- 2 Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty,
 God reveals himself in glory.
- 3 Our God will come and will not keep silence;
 before him there is a consuming flame,
 and round about him a raging storm.
- 4 He calls the heavens and the earth from above
 to witness the judgment of his people.
- 5 "Gather before me my loyal followers,
 those who have made a covenant with me
 and sealed it with sacrifice."
- 6 Let the heavens declare the rightness of his cause;
 for God himself is judge.

Mark 9:2-9

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.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

SERMON

I wonder how often you feel confronted by your faith? I know you're often comforted by your faith, but I'm talking about how often you experience in-your-face confrontation with the assertions of your faith and how you react to it. Our faith is, among all the world's religions, the most confrontational, I think, because it is founded on mysteries which are inexpressible. Our faith is founded upon things too holy for words, ineffable things which transcend our ability to speak of them. I wonder how often you think about that.

Hindus have the sutras. Islam has the Holy Koran. The Church of Latter Day Saints has the Book of Mormon. Jews have Torah and the Hebrew Scriptures. We have the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. I'm not Muslim, but I can read the Holy Koran and take from it what I think wise, or dispute with what I think is un-

wise. I don't belong to the Church of Latter Day Saints, but I could read the Book of Mormon and similarly dispute with it. I needn't confront either to read them. I cannot dispute with the Transfiguration or the Resurrection without first confronting what I am being told. To read of either, I am forced to confront the seminal question: how do I incorporate what I am being told into my left-brain, analytic, objectified 21st Century brain? Are these accounts the ravings of a madman or some religious fanatic? Are they wishful thinking by a post-Easter community bereft of its leader? Are they symbolic? Are they propaganda? Are they something else? The Transfiguration and the Resurrection must be confronted before you can move on to dispute or absorb the teachings of the one called the Christ. The rub, of course, is that we rarely give ourselves permission to do that sort of heavy heavy lifting. Instead, we place our

faith in the words we are accustomed to use to describe our relationship with God, jam our hands in our pockets, and walk away whistling a brave tune. On the one hand, it's a very Presbyterian way to go about things, decently and in good order. On the other hand, when we do this, we cut ourselves off from the spring of living water which could be ours. You don't have to agree with me about this, but I do hope you'll think about it a little.

Why am I so sure about this? It is because of what scholars call the "Messianic Secret" in Mark. Over and over again, when Jesus casts out demons or does other acts of power, he insists that no one speak of it, despite the ringing words which form the beginning of Mark's Gospel:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,
the Son of God.

Throughout the telling, up until the Transfiguration,

this very moment, Jesus insists upon the keeping of the Messianic Secret. No one must know the true identity of Jesus. Why? Isn't that what the Gospel is about? What's the big secret?

There is no secret, in the sense of secret knowledge held by believers. There is only the absolute insistence by Jesus on the necessity of confronting this first, great stumbling block on the way to the Resurrection. The good news of Jesus Christ cannot be absorbed in an off-hand manner. It cannot be brushed over. It must be confronted, in full possession of our faculties, intentionally.

I wonder if the story Mark tells is so familiar, so often received throughout our entire lives that that very familiarity has dissipated the impact of the titanic confrontation between what you know and what you are being told that this event represents? You know that in your experience, clothes do not spontaneously become

blazing white. Men dead for centuries do not appear before you. Words do not come from heaven, deafening all your understanding and commanding you to listen to the man with whom you have been walking, revealing Him to be something other than what you thought – revealing Him as a being of inexpressible, ineffable holiness, despite the witness of your own eyes. You know these things! How are you to survive this confrontation? Which will crumble first? your understanding, or the story Mark tells? I pray that it is your understanding which crumbles to dust. I ask with the Psalmist, “Is there a man of reason who seeks God?¹”

Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk interprets this to mean, “Is a man who has nothing but his own reason capable of seeking God?” I would answer, “No. Such a one is too poorly equipped to seek God. He is blind and his very

¹ Psalm 14:2

powers of reason will blind him still further. He must first confront the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, and he must expose his very self sacrificially upon the field of that confrontation. Then, he may seek God.”

Why am I making such drama of this? We know that Jesus is the Son of God. God knows we have been hearing that since before we could speak! It says so, right in the first sentence of Mark’s Gospel. Got it. Let’s move on to the part where we get saved.

It won’t do, church. You can’t move on to the part where you get saved until you go through the way of the Transfiguration just as did James, and John and Peter. You must first confront the Transfiguration, then you must confront the Resurrection. From those confrontations, you will become either a Christian or a non-believer. There is no middle course, however much we may wish it. God cannot be received pridefully.

We are proud of our intelligence and reason. We are, in fact, just as the Psalmist says – people of reason. If we confront the Transfiguration, who is to say that we will survive it with our reason intact? And if we do not, what will we then be, if not people of reason? So, we read of the Transfiguration and we mentally take note of the lessons it suggests — Peter impulsively trying to build dwellings on the mountaintop to keep Moses and Elijah and Jesus safe from the weather, the image of clean perfection in the blinding white clothes, the command to listen to Jesus, but do we confront it? Do we say, “This far and no further will my reason take me”, then fall down in silence, or do we stuff our hands deep in our pockets, and, whistling a brave tune, turn and walk quickly away, trying to preserve our selves and our dignity in the face of that which will permit no such prideful strategies?

“Who do you say that I am?”, asked Jesus, and Peter made the great confession, “You are the Messiah”. Peter was wrong. “Messiah” is A word. Jesus is The Word. The Transfiguration is Jesus’ answer to Peter’s confession.

Our world is filled with people who have read of the Transfiguration, turned and walked away. It is a symbolic bit of writing from an ignorant, superstitious people, years ago. It is propaganda by the church for its own purposes. It is a fairy tale. It is a miracle.

Others in our world read of the Transfiguration and see only a confirmation of their earlier understandings. “See?”, they assert. “Jesus is the Son of God, just as I said. This proves I'm right.” The time on the mountain with the disciples is not about proving what a thoroughgoing theologian you are. It is about showing you how little you apprehend when you seek God through your

reason.

Paul relates:

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

“Those who are perishing” are not those outside the church. They are those, both inside and outside the church, who have jammed their hands in their pockets and walked from the Transfiguration without confronting it. They are those who, thinking they knew the truth, looked only for confirmation of their own thoughts. The biggest obstacle to faith is to permit yourself to be satisfied with half-truths and half-journeys.

Jesus reminds us elsewhere that no man can serve two masters. We try, in our time, to do so, to serve both the revelation of the Transfiguration and our reason. It

cannot be done. The events that Mark relates cannot be squared with a world of reason, logic and scientific certainty. When you confront the Transfiguration, you must choose. You cannot serve two masters. One must crumble – your reason or Mark’s words.

I said that the biggest obstacle to faith is to permit yourself to be satisfied with half-truths and half-journeys. This, I sense, is the contemporary approach to the faith of our Fathers, an approach of more-or-less grudging acceptance of faith as opinion or interpretation. In this way, nothing need crumble. In this way, we have found a confrontation-free course around the Transfiguration which permits us to retain our image of ourselves as reasonable people, while comforting ourselves that we believe in the revelation of Mark’s Gospel.

But it is a false path. It is as if we tried to listen to music by looking at notes on a paper, or tried to appreci-

ate a painting by tasting the canvas. It is participation without involvement, an arid landscape where things may only be discussed, netted in words, autopsied. To understand the structures of a rose, we peel the petals, one by one, until no rose is left, contenting ourselves with what we have learned at the expense of the beauty of the rose. There never is a confrontation with the rose, itself.

As I move through our world, the largest identifiable group of people outside the church which I can find are those who simply refuse to engage the teachings of the church. They are not necessarily hostile to the church. They are immune to it. These folks find that engaging the story which we tell as Christians is unimportant to them. The story has no impact. Faith, the ability to confront the story and to trust in it, is a gift, and not given to everyone. Paul is harsher than I would be when he

calls such people without the gift of faith “perishing”.

The largest identifiable group of people inside the church which I can find are those who refuse to engage the Scriptural accounts and satisfy themselves with “it’s a miracle”, as if that explained anything, just as those outside the church satisfy themselves with “it’s propaganda” or “it’s all superstitious nonsense”. Neither course, superstition or miracle, has the power to alter your heart. They are just ways to avoid confronting what is being told you.

The stories we read each week are not gathered together to teach us that the world is 6,000 years old, as Bishop Usher thought, or to stir up arguments over evolution of species. They are there because they have the power to alter your heart if you engage them. Scripture has the power to lift you from where you are, and to move you in a new direction, but it requires abandon-

ment of our most treasured means of avoiding confrontation. It requires a courageous willingness to confront the stories and permit them to work their will within us.

Take your hands out of your pockets. Stop whistling. Face the Transfiguration, for soon, we will face the Resurrection.

AMEN