

Transfiguration 2006
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“In a World Where Nothing Is Certain”

Here we are, together again at worship. Just as Jesus led three disciples up on a mountain so God’s Holy Spirit has called us and gathered us here once again. The room that we are sitting in is called a sanctuary and its purpose is to offer appropriate space in which to can gather to worship God. The whole pattern of worship is, of course, one of drama. But sometimes when the stories from the bible are read this room becomes, for a moment, more of a theater. As the story is read it comes alive. We are drawn in to the story. And, sometimes, the story and its characters touch our lives in unexpected ways. The story of the Transfiguration, from the gospel of Mark, is one of those dramatic stories.

If I were to write a play as a take off from this story its title would be “In a World Where Nothing Is Certain”. The story of the Transfiguration stands out in the gospel of Mark. It is an abrupt change in the story. It is a transition from act one to act 2. We have shared with you over the years that some scholars believe that Mark is best understood if it is read from beginning to end in one setting. Dr. David Rhoads has memorized the whole gospel and presented it in this very dramatic way.

The Transfiguration Story is really a pivotal scene in the whole drama. To this point the character of Jesus has been carefully developed. He is a very complex character. On one level he is powerful calming storms and driving out demons. He is compassionate healing the most vulnerable. At times we can see a man who himself is willing to become completely vulnerable in his love and feelings towards others. By the time that we get to the Transfiguration Jesus has also become a socially controversial character. We wonder who this Jesus really is and what he is about.

In chapter eight Jesus tried to clear up his identity. “And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him.” On the mountain top the three disciples still aren’t sure of who Jesus is, even though he has tried to tell them.

In any well-written drama we naturally identify with the characters. When the story is over we feel like we share their lives. We are somehow changed by knowing them. Who wouldn’t want to spend time with this powerful, yet gentle and compassionate man? He ranks with the greatest of them all including Moses and Elijah.

To add to the spectacle his robes became whiter than any person could make them. Moses and Elijah come for a visit. To this point we, in this sanctuary/theater, have now followed Jesus to the top of the mountain with Peter, James and John. We identify with them, “How cool to be with these three, bigger than life characters!” The disciples’ first impulse was to make the experience last as long as possible. Those special moments in life can never be long enough! What better

way than to build a new set right there and allow this drama to play on this stage as long as possible?

Many scholars, like Henri Nouwen, have said that the story of the Transfiguration is a sort of icon, a dramatic representation of God. Icons are windows through which we can, from the very depth of our being, come in touch with the kingdom of God. Like any good icon we are pulled into this story to see through it and beyond it to the very heart of God. In this drama God has a line, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” Listen to him, Peter! He is, just as he said, going to die and rise on the third day.

Suddenly the atmosphere was no longer charged with negative ions that make the hair stand up on the back of our necks. Moses and Elijah are gone. The only one left with us is Jesus. His robe is just a plain old robe. We are promised that we will be led to the very heart of God, if we follow him, now more like any other person than someone bigger than life, now one of us.

From this little journey up a mountain we see that God’s first instinct is not to lead us to high and mighty places away from the real world to live and worship. Now, by his actions, we see who Jesus really is. He is going down the mountain as the scene ends. We follow still wondering what this is all about. Jesus isn’t turned away from the world, but toward the world as the drama of life continues.

There is nothing wrong with celebrating those moments in life that lift us to new heights experiencing the joys and mysteries of being human beings. If this were wrong, Jesus would not have led his disciples to the mountain. But if our experiences of God, especially our worship experiences, are limited to only the spiritual highs, then our faith lives stay on the peaks beyond the realities of everyday life. Our worship lives would consist of only experiencing one emotional high after another. We would be spiritually addicted to having only emotional and spiritual highs instead of experiences that heal us and send us fresh back into life.

If we could only worship on mountain tops then Churches would become religious communities set apart from the world, different from the real world, better than the real world, above the real world and everything that happens in the real world. We would not care about what is happening in the world. We would only care about how good we are and how godly we are. When churches get to that place the divine impulse, the very heart of God, has gone out of them.

In the ebb and flow of our spiritual lives we do have both highs and lows. We have choices about how to respond to the mountain top transfiguration events in our lives. We can ruin them with “if onlys (if only I could stay here longer; if only I could relive that experience). We can reminisce about our experiences, caressing and massaging them as an excuse to disengage from the world. Or we can allow them to prepare us for what God calls us to do next.” (Phyllis Kersten)

Jesus ordered his disciples, at the end of today’s scene, not to tell anyone what they had seen, until after the son of man had risen from the dead.

Jesus tells us, he shows us, that if we are going to be God’s people our lives must also be orientated towards the world. Our faces and our hearts must be turned toward the world.

Douglas Hall writes: “But Jesus led them down the mountain into the midst of the crowds crying for truth and healing. The Holy One tabernacles with humanity – even unholy humanity.”

The holy one of God, Jesus, comes to us in a world where nothing is certain. The holy one of God comes to us when everything has been going so well, and then the doctor announces, “you have cancer”. The holy one of God comes to us when the phone rings and a familiar voice says, “your father just died.” The holy one of God comes to us when we read about people dying in wars, and riots and mudslides and Jesus says to us, “I am already there, I couldn’t be anywhere else.”

Do you see how the drama of the story, the drama of life has now shifted? We are no longer identifying with this character, Jesus. We are totally amazed that he has come to identify with us, to be with us.

In a world, where nothing is certain, we can be certain that Jesus is with us, especially when life is so uncertain. The one thing we can count on is that he is with us.

Remember, he says, “hold it down, until after my resurrection.” Jesus’ death and resurrection cut through everything. In his suffering and death we know that he will always be with us. In his resurrection we have the assurance that Jesus will get us through everything.

Last week I visited one of our elder saints in a nursing home, Dorie Jensen. Dorie has had crippling arthritis for years, yet she has maintained a vibrant and active faith. Several weeks ago she had a stroke. But she was able to speak clearly and well. She was able to honestly name the affects of the stroke with its initial emotional affects. But in the end she just said, “But I know that it is going to be all right.” Whatever the outcome, in the end, after all is said and done, come what may, everything will be all right. Because Jesus is with her, because Jesus is with us, in a world where nothing is certain, we can be sure of that.

And there is one more thing. Because we can count on God for life and eternal life, we also are given the courage to risk our lives for the sake of others as we come down from the peaks or life brings us down. Our future salvation is in God’s hands therefore we have no reason to worry. It’s all about the resurrection. With that good news we are free to live. But if we follow Jesus we can not live passively, refusing to care about the world and those most in need of God’s presence. We are called to follow Jesus down the mountain where we live out our faith every day, active in God’s love. And in a world where nothing is certain, when we go the hard places to care, we can be certain that Jesus will already be there, waiting for us to join him ... walking humbly, loving kindness and doing justice.

Amen!