

“Mountaintop Pause”
Transfiguration Sunday
Mark 9: 2 – 9
February 11, 2018
Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

It’s that time of the year again; time for a mountaintop pause. I don’t know about you, but I could use a little mountaintop pause. I could use a little time away from the brokenness of the plains below, could use a little time to gain perspective, to soak in a bit of God’s glory shining through!

Each year at this time, this ‘between the church seasons of Epiphany and Lent’ time, we are given a mountaintop pause. This year, reading the gospel of Mark, right in the middle, we are given a mountaintop pause with this gospel writer’s version of the Transfiguration story.

“Transfiguration”, not a word we hear in every day conversation. In Webster’s dictionary, the definition of ‘transfiguration’ is the act or an instance of transfiguring or the state of being transfigured. Not very helpful. Let’s go to ‘transfigure’ – to change the appearance of something or someone.

Transfiguration with a capital ‘T’, again from Webster’s: ‘the change in the appearance of Christ that took place before three disciples’, i.e., today’s gospel reading. And to that definition I and probably many other preachers will add: The story of Jesus on the mountaintop that is probably one of the hardest stories to make sense out of, one of the most difficult of stories for Christians today: a booming voice from the clouds, a glowing, shiny Jesus, the appearance of ghosts from scriptures past. What do we do with it? How does it relate to our lives today? Why even read texts like this one in our modern day scientific world? Why not just skip it for today, and read a parable or other favorite story? (It’s tempting!)

My answer to that is “because it’s important”. It’s a story that is found in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) which emphasizes its importance. And, as followers of Christ, we pay attention to, we ‘listen’ to those important texts. We take a mountaintop pause each year, a pause to remember, to soak in a bit of glory, to listen.

This Sunday ends the season of Epiphany; the season in which we celebrate God’s light made manifest in the world. If we were to turn back to the very beginning of Mark’s gospel, we would remember that this gospel doesn’t begin with Three Kings but the Epiphany story of the baptism of Jesus, when the heavens open and there is a voice from above, “You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” This season of God’s light shining in the world, God’s love made manifest, this season has two bookend stories of a booming voice affirming the place of Jesus in God’s cosmic story. If we read today’s scripture with historical lens in place, it’s easy to get wrapped up in trying to prove or disprove that such events took place. However, if we read this story with theological lens, as in asking ourselves what this means in faith language, we can see more clearly. We see that the early writers of all three gospels are trying to convey that there was something more to this historical Jesus. In him, God’s light shone like no other, God’s glory wasn’t just reflected off of him but revealed in him and through him. As one writer put it,

“God’s glory takes up residence in Jesus.” As we pause on the mountaintop with this story, I would hope that, without excluding other religions, we can affirm and celebrate the ways in which we experience the Holy through Jesus, the ‘something more’ that the gospel writers were trying to get at.

So, the two stories that bookend this season of Epiphany in the gospel of Mark; the story of the baptism of Jesus and today’s reading. Both with booming voices from the heavens with slight differences in what the cosmic voice has to say. In the baptism, God is affirming to Jesus the place of Jesus, ‘you are my son’. In today’s reading, the cosmic voice booms out to the Disciples and therefore to us that identity, ‘This is my son’ and tacking that three-word reminder on the end, “Listen to him.”

In the story, it’s a directive to the disciples on the mountaintop but more importantly to the ones hearing it as it was written years later; the early followers then and the followers today, i.e., us. “Listen to him.” The days ahead in the gospel story lead to Jerusalem, to trial, to crucifixion, death. Listen to him, do not stray during this difficult time, says the Cosmic voice to the disciples, remember this mountaintop pause, yes, but listen to him. And we know that these are the gospel writer’s words to the early church at that time as well, wondering when Jesus was returning and facing hard times. And these are words to the church of today as well as we struggle to walk in faithful steps, trying to figure out what that means in today’s world. Listen to him early church and church of today in the preaching and teaching and healing and living throughout all of the gospels, not listening to just the words in red that some say are the true words of Jesus but listening to the message of the entire story and the way that story directs us.

You know, there are a number of people who state that they are spiritual but not religious. Part of me gets that. But a larger part of me is grateful for the church throughout the ages as we try to listen together, to discern what Jesus has said to us in scripture and what the living Christ is saying to us now. And I have to admit that many times and in many ways the church has not been very good at listening to HIM. Instead the church throughout the ages and even today has listened and listens to its own agenda and biases/prejudices and national agendas. Still, I do believe that the Spirit of God moves in and among the church and sometimes we get it right, we indeed listen and are able to hear and proclaim Jesus’ words of healing and mercy when our community is reeling from the gun deaths of 3 teens in one night this week. We listen and are able to hear and then proclaim Jesus’ words of challenge and judgment when we talk of building walls, shutting people out, excluding. We as church, when we get it right, listen and help each other hear the affirmation of God’s love for the world. For all of us and for all of creation!

There are other messages out there. Sometimes we give them more authority in our lives. Sometimes it’s hard to know whether we are hearing correctly or not – and we need each other to help in that hearing/interpreting. We need each other to be able to share those Holy moment times in our lives, share our experiences of God’s love, talk to and listen to each other’s faith stories. But it’s not just about staying on the mountaintop. “This is my son, my beloved, listen to him.” Listen and be transformed.

The words to the hymn we will sing before communion are, “Transform us as you transfigured, stood apart on Tabor’s height. Lead us up our sacred mountains, search us with revealing light. Lead us down those daily pathways where our love is not confined.”

Do we think of this when we think of church, when we come to church? Do we think of being transformed? Do we allow ourselves to listen with our ears and our hearts to the messages that Jesus gives us through the scriptures and through each other and even in those quiet moment when we’d rather he just mind his own business? “Transform us as you transfigured”, allowing the light of God’s love that we know through the Christ event to shine in those dark places of doubt and despair and hate in our lives, to shine them out! “Transform us”, from self loathing we may feel or guilt or secrets that we hide to being able to embrace that each of us is a child of God loved by God – that is the Jesus message if we would just listen to it! Oh, but there’s more. With eyes and hearts wide open, we would also hear the part about loving God over loving money, or our class or our privilege – that’s a hard message to hear but a transformational one nonetheless! “Listen to him” as he talks about the kingdom of God on earth, here, let loose and available for all if we would just follow.

Rev. Anthony Robinson, preacher and church consultant, has written that he thinks a problem with the church today (and perhaps years past) is that we’ve forgotten our purpose. He writes that we often think of ourselves as a social club where people can find enjoyment or a social service agency to help the needy or a chapel to heal our wounds. All of these are part of what it means to be church but the purpose of the church, he states, is transformation. The purpose of the church is to bring about change in people’s lives. Or perhaps better put, ‘to allow people the space to be open to God bringing change in people’s lives.

Transform us as you transfigured...not him or her or them but me and us.

I wonder if we had been with the disciples on that mountaintop pause, would we have acted like Peter? Trying to capture the moment instead of being transformed by it? This story played out today, instead of wanting to build a shelter for Jesus and Elijah and Moses we would be whipping out our phones and trying to take selfies.

I am so very grateful for this complicated and far out scripture that gives us a mountaintop pause. Pause to remember that the light does shine out any darkness. Pause to try to discern how the glory of God shines in our lives today. Pause to listen and in that listening be transformed. And then as the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ in the world, take that transformational power out into the world, shining out the darkness, loving out the hate, offering healing and wholeness to our fragmented world.

May it be so.