

“LIGHT OUT OF DARKNESS”

A Sermon for the Transfiguration, February 11, 2018

Text: Mark 9:2-9

Because you and I worship Jesus as the Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, it is hard for us to see him the way his contemporaries did. It is difficult to remember that even when we look directly at him we see “light shining out of darkness.”

It is true, as I have been saying the last few weeks: Jesus was amazing. He taught with authority. He healed the sick and cast out unclean spirits. He fed the five thousand.

But those are the highlights. The context was more confusing.

Right before the transfiguration Jesus said, *“Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him too will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”*

Who could possibly be ashamed of Jesus? Well, all those who were listening to him had considered it. They took those words to heart. It was easy, even remembering what he said and did . . . it was easy to be ashamed of Jesus and of his words.

In the passage right after today’s story Jesus asked his disciples--and he was talking about himself--*“How has it been written about the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be held in contempt?”* They nodded. They had witnessed Jesus being held in contempt.

To accept and follow Jesus as their Lord meant that his disciples had to take the bad with the good. They had to get used to him saying and doing things which other people thought were wrong. When Jesus was refused entrance to a village, so were they. When people mocked Jesus, said he was out of his mind,

said he had a demon, all sorts of things like that, they also took the hit.

As soon as people began to think of Jesus as the Messiah, they remembered not only that the Messiah would save, but also that the Messiah had been of whom Isaiah had prophesied in chapter 53:

He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

One of the more embarrassing episodes of Jesus’ life is recounted by Mark in chapter 3. (We won’t hear it until June 10, but it had already taken place before today’s events.) We are told that

He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. (Mark then names the twelve.) Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” . . . His mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.

That was worse than awkward. More than embarrassing. But that was Jesus “being Jesus.”

Yes, Jesus did stupendous things and was a smash hit so that people ran after him and wanted to follow him. But they were always just one paradoxical statement away from being turned off by him and abandoning him.

In John 6, for example, he fed five thousand people miraculously, but by the end of the day they had all left him because of something he said.

So. Jesus was an embarrassment. That is one truth about Jesus. The one who was not “too good to be true” but “too hard to follow.” He was a stumbling block, to the very people he was asking to believe in him.

What was the truth about Jesus? Would the real Jesus please stand up? Does Jesus speak for God, or not?

This is an enduring question of our faith. It never goes away because the alternative answers never go away. Our experience, our observations, our logic, our friends’ advice, point in many directions on the most important questions we have. Quite sad and very evil things continue to happen. We ask: Is God love? Is God just? Is God a perfectionist? Is life fair? Why do bad things happen to good people, and vice versa? Will we ever be all right?

Until the end of time there will be questions, and doubt, and anxiety, and fear. What gives us courage to stand and deliver? Where do we find the wherewithal to give our lives in loving service to others? How can we know the mind of God?

Here in the middle of the gospel of Mark, on the Mount of Transfiguration, for one brief moment in an otherwise tumultuous life, long after his mother was turned away from the inn at Bethlehem and shortly before he is going to be driven out of Jerusalem to be crucified, here, for one brief shining moment, there is clarity. Immediately after Peter admonishes Jesus to stay away from Jerusalem, fearing the worst, God tells James and Peter and John to shut up and LISTEN TO JESUS. “Because this is my Son, the Beloved.”

Which seemed to cement their allegiance, so that Jesus could stay on course for Jerusalem and defeat; continue his decline in favor with the authorities, and be persecuted and delivered to death; Jesus

could continue to embarrass them by doing things like cursing a fig tree; yet they would follow him.

And in the end came the payoff.

They got Jesus. They did! In the end, they saw why Jesus spoke so the wise would not understand; why he was holy yet associated with riffraff; why he turned forgiveness into a way of life, so that he ended up dying for them.

They got Jesus.

And because they got Jesus, because the Transfiguration pinned Jesus to their hearts and minds, you and I also get that in Jesus we see the love of God revealed unequivocally and without reservation for all who put their trust in him.

Paul tells us the story of the Transfiguration in our second reading:

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Transfiguration, in which Jesus momentarily appeared in whiter garments than anyone had ever seen, was God snapping his fingers to get our attention. You and I are easily fooled, gulled into believing this or that theory about why people are the way they are, why the world is the way the world is, and who can solve all our problems.

God says, “Look here. Listen to him.”

When we do, we see that God is in Christ reconciling us to himself, blessing us with forgiveness and calling us to receive the mantle of Jesus ourselves so that we can be healed reconcilers.

When we look at the “face of Jesus Christ,” who was “despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, who had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him”; we see the one who “was wounded for our transgressions,

crushed for our iniquities, upon whom was the punishment that made us whole, by whose bruises we are healed.”—to finish off the Isaiah 53 prophecy.

In short, when we look at the face of Jesus with James and Peter and John, we see our healing, and we see that our healing is the will of God and the glory of God. We see light coming out of darkness.

In the beginning, God said *“Let light shine out of darkness.”* Out of the darkness of Jesus’ humiliation and suffering and death shines the joy of resurrection and new life for all of us.

Amen.

