

Sermon: Awestruck

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Mark 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

transfigure

verb (used with object), transfigured, transfiguring.

1. to change in outward form or appearance; transform.
2. to change so as to glorify or exalt.

Most Protestant churches celebrate the Transfiguration on the Sunday following the last Sunday after the Epiphany and before Ash Wednesday. Today's reading from Mark also happens to occur at the midpoint of his Gospel. So, for both the church and for Mark, today becomes a bridge between Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching in Galilee, and his ministry of sacrifice on the journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

When we read and re-read a Scripture passage and let it seep into us over the course of time, eventually it begins to speak to us. We hear things in the passage that we may not have heard before. We inevitably begin to see beyond just the words, and so it is with our passage from Mark today.

Here are some things that stood out for me:

Jesus leads Peter, James, and John 'up a high mountain, *apart*.' Apart from what? Perhaps Mark wants to emphasize that the four men were above the world, separate and removed from earthly concerns, the way Jesus was apart during his time in the wilderness. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared to them. Moses was transformed, and his perspective changed, on a mountain; the same thing happened to Elijah, who heard God in the silence on *the* mountain (1 Kings 19:11-13). A theologian named Dorothy Lee wrote that 'the mountain is a numinous place' – mysterious, awe-inspiring, yet a place that can instill hope.

Laurence Stookey wrote that "Christ's glory is hidden from the eyes of the world, yet revealed to the eyes of faith, who know his suffering, death, and resurrection." We know both sides of the story: has it been transformative for us? Maybe we need to get apart from the world and see it with new eyes too.

Another thing: When the disciples see Jesus ‘transfigured before them,’ it’s his *clothes* – not his face or body but his clothes – that become dazzling white. God dropped some heavenly veil and enabled the disciples to see Jesus as he really was – would that account for them being terrified? In Exodus, when all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai while Moses received the Law, ‘they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance’ (Exodus 20:18). When God’s around, you know it in your bones. I think people sometimes turn away from God for that very reason. It’s not for the squeamish.

And finally: The disciples would rather stay on the mountain. In fact, they want to build three dwellings, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Who could blame them? But that would only serve to separate Jesus from the Law (represented by Moses) and the prophets (represented by Elijah), when in fact Jesus is the fulfillment of both. Beverly Gaventa, a professor at Baylor University, *suggests* that the disciples ‘want to have the glory that they can *see* without the message that they must *hear*.’

Peter and the others do have high expectations for the Messiah but *suffering* and *death on a cross* are not necessarily on their list. The bit about rising from the dead is especially perplexing to them. Maybe, having just witnessed Jesus in his glory, the men are terrified *because* they know what is coming next. In fact, Jesus had just rebuked Peter for misunderstanding the suffering, rejection, and death to come (Mark 8:31-33). Maybe Peter just couldn’t handle the truth that Jesus had to come back down the mountain, back to the world and the world’s sin, to face his trial and death.

Mark repeatedly highlights the humanness of the disciples, and their very human point of view. What would we need to see and what would we need to hear, in order to understand and to follow? Would we want to continue the journey or would we, like the disciples, prefer to stay up on the mountain? That’s the tension we face today. Are we ready to look ahead to what has to happen next? What were those disciples hoping for, and in what ways do our hopes match theirs?

I met someone this week who was looking for some counseling. But before he decided to trust me, he needed to know that we were on the same page on a few things.

He asked me to tell him who Jesus was for me. Now, when we have to articulate a belief or an opinion, rather than just think it in our heads, it expands and becomes more concrete. This is a conversation we can all have with each other: Who is Jesus for you?

Anyway, reading Mark's Gospel in light of that conversation, I thought about what Jesus being 'transfigured before them' meant, and I came up with that that must be what Jesus really looks like all the time when he isn't hanging around with humans.

And if that's the case, then maybe, even though Jesus changed 'in outward form or appearance,' glorified and exalted, according to our definition, maybe it was the disciples who are actually transfigured here. It was they who gained a new understanding about Jesus. They were transformed, not him. Jesus was just being himself, revealed to them. Our understanding changes if we look at Jesus as he truly is: 'God with skin on,' as our friend the Rev. Anne Robertson once put it.

We can say that Jesus is the last of the Biblical prophets, but we have lately known and experienced other messengers of God. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for one, often used mountaintop imagery in his writings, especially in his last speech where he said, "I've been to the mountaintop...And I've seen the promised land...I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." He'd been to the mountaintop and yet he came down again because the work wasn't done.

In his 1963 book, *The Strength to Love*,¹ a collection of sermons, King spoke about, and offered antidotes to, fear. He wrote that an accumulation of fears "culminates in phobiophobia or the fear of fear itself." He said if we were to lose our sense of fear, we would be deprived of our capacity "to grow, invent, and create."

We need a sense of fear. Fear is normal and necessary. Our trouble, King wrote, is "that we attempt to conquer fear without faith." He was under no illusions about pain and suffering, but he knew that a positive religious faith provides an "inner equilibrium" that helps us face the strains and burdens, and fears, that inevitably come to us all. Faith assures us, he wrote, "that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned."

It's okay to come down from the mountain. It's okay to be afraid. When the disciples did finally come down, they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, "but only Jesus (verse 8)."

Jesus is the one who fulfills all that Scripture promises. Jesus is the one who brings us into peaceful relationship with our neighbors. Jesus is the one who brings us into relationship with God. Even if we're on our way to the cross, Jesus is with us.

King closed his book with the following motto, which he remembered seeing “in the homes of devout persons” and which “need to be etched on our hearts:”

Fear knocked at the door.
Faith answered.
There was no one there.

Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).