

Last Sunday after Epiphany/Transfiguration - February 26, 2006
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Mark 9:2-9
2 Cor 4:3-6

Seeing Both the *Divinity* and *Humanity* of Jesus

Today we stand at a crossroads, a transition point between the season of Epiphany and Lent. Epiphany, meaning to “show,” or “make known”, has taken us through numerous examples of Christ “revealing” himself as the Son of God. Lent, on the other hand, is a season for reflection, soul searching and connecting one’s life with that of Christ. As we stand in this transition moment, it is important to take stock of what was *really* made known during epiphany.

When we look to the gospel of Mark for this answer, we see one clear strand running through his account: Jesus offered signs of his true identity as the Son of God, and yet the people around him were unable or unwilling to accept this message. Whether it was the Pharisees, wayward disciples or even his own family, Jesus was met with challenges at virtually every turn. In chapter 8 of Mark, for example, Jesus is frustrated with his disciples for their inability to understand him. He says, “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?”

For the most part, we are not surprised by these hard headed disciples. However, Mark’s gospel takes the point farther than the other gospel writers when he suggests that even Jesus’ own mother and family were not fully aware of his role as prophet. In chapter 3, Jesus entered a house and once again drew a crowd. “When his family heard of this, they went to take charge of him,” and said “he is out of his mind”. Both Matthew and Luke omit this passage in their reckoning of the story. As we approach the final readings from the epiphany season, we must keep these overarching themes of skepticism and hard headedness in mind.

Today’s transfiguration account in Mark 9 brings both the unveiling of Jesus’ true nature and the resistance of his disciples into intimate tension. In short, the presentation of Jesus as God’s son is at its clearest point, and yet the disciples are still struggling to respond in the proper way. Much like the Old Testament account of Moses’ trip to the mountain top, Jesus takes 3 privileged disciples up a mountain to deliver an unforgettable message. As they approach the peak, Jesus is suddenly transfigured or changed in form. His clothes turn to a blinding white, of the sort worn only by divine beings. Shortly after, Moses and Elijah appear on the scene, thus bringing a heightened level of importance to the moment. Feeling overwhelmed by the situation and dumbfounded about what to do, Peter suggested that they “make three dwellings” or tents in order to stay the night and preserve this moment. Before Jesus answers, an immense cloud appears and the voice of God exclaims, “this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Then the cloud vanished and only Jesus remained. As Jesus and the disciples began their descent; Peter, James and John were told to keep their mountaintop experience a secret from all others until “after the Son of Man had risen from the dead”.

When people hear this passage, they often respond in one of two ways- they either write it off as untenable and irrelevant myth, or they do as Peter did and take ownership

of the moment, thus seeking to prolong the experience, claiming to have uncovered the mystery of God and his son. As we try to glean authentic guidance and direction from this passage today, we would do well to see our own connection with the disciples of Jesus. How many times do we try and box Jesus into a palatable package, a convenient message to be used when needed, our own opiate? How many times do we write off the unbelievable passages as irrelevant to our own lives? To put it in a different light- If the disciples who knew Jesus were able to misunderstand him so frequently, we can only imagine how far off the mark we must be, now that we are reading about these moments of epiphany.

The good news for today is that it's not too late. The bad news is that we must start by coming to terms with the frequency by which we miss the mark. One of the best professors of divinity, besides Dudley of course, is Harvey Cox- who can be of help in approaching Jesus with honest eyes. In his recent book, *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, Cox tells us that we're looking for the moral relevance of Jesus in the wrong ways. There are 2 things we can change in order to be better disciples. One, we need to remember that Jesus was first and foremost a Rabbi. As Cox says, "he taught and applied Torah, the Jewish law...He never delivered an easy answer to a hard question but, in time-honored rabbinical fashion, asked another question or told one of his unforgettable stories. He would not allow people to escape the responsibility of making their own decisions. Instead he enlisted them in a way of thinking that would nurture and extend their moral insight. This is exactly what the best rabbis have always done, and still do".

Secondly, we need to use our imaginations and intuition when studying the teachings of Jesus. Though Jesus certainly helped to pass on a moral message, he did so by relying more on narrative and example than on precept and principle. Jesus wanted to awaken people from their moral slumbers, asking them to "intuit what is important and what is not, to envision alternative possibilities, and to see beyond what sometimes appears to be an impasse. We need to appreciate not just how other people see things but how they feel about them, and to do this our most potent resource is still the human imagination, awakened by compelling narratives".

If we revisit the transfiguration account with these two guidelines in mind, we have a better chance of avoiding the pitfalls of neutering the message of Jesus or writing it off wholesale. For starters, thinking about Jesus as a rabbi can help us to understand the importance of suffering in his life and message. For example, it is hardly ironic that Mark focuses on the response of Peter when they are on the mountaintop. Earlier in the Marcan gospel, Peter clearly rejects the portrait of Jesus as the suffering Son of Man. Jesus is frustrated by this and remarks that not only will he suffer but that his followers will also suffer.

In similar fashion, Peter tries to preserve the mountaintop experience by setting up tents for the evening. He wants so badly to cling to this glimpse of Jesus' divinity that he is unable to recognize the necessity of suffering in that picture. Peter's misguided desire to enshrine the moment is repeated every time anyone insists of God, (or of another person, for that matter) that things be all of the time the way they were that glorious instant when everything was perfect, or seemed perfect. After all, the whole point of an extraordinary moment is that it isn't ordinary. As wonderful as it can be, it cannot be that way all of the time. To demand that, or to crave that, is futile. It is also one of the great dangers of such a gift. Seeing Jesus as a rabble-rousing rabbi can help us to

understand the struggle we must incur as we grow. We must be able to live with the questions and allow some stories to have unsatisfying or incomplete endings. Rabbinical teachings are not meant to give easy answers to seekers. Rather, they give us the tools to ask the right questions and to make meaning out of suffering. As we learn about the transfiguration, we cannot whittle down the message for ease of understanding.

In keeping with Cox's second point, we need to expand our moral and spiritual imaginations to avoid the pitfalls of unbelief. Yes, on the face of things we might find the transfiguration of Jesus to be a fantastical event. Some folks may be lucky enough to have had conversations with God or even visions, but the rest of us need to sharpen our imaginative faculties. The transfiguration story shows us how God's glory and divinity breaks into our ordinary timeline. The whole season of epiphany charts the entrance of God's love and divinity into our lives. Rather than boxing up these moments or explaining them away, we must all descend the mountain at some point. These moments where the divine light shines in the midst of our lives are there to remind us that there is more out there than we realize, that there is a goal, that there is hope, and that what you see is, thanks be to God, not all that you get.

What might all of this mean for us today? It can serve to remind us that the epiphany season of revelation and uncovering Jesus' identity is impossible without our willingness to work at seeing and hearing God in our lives. The rabbinical roots of Jesus' teachings do not give us easy and palatable answers but rather put the onus on us to wrestle with the stories and questions. By confronting the suffering that coincides with the divinity of Christ, we may be able to transfigure our own suffering as well. If we allow the modern day moments of glory to be lights along our path, we are more likely to get through the dark periods.

How might we connect with this divinity and humanity of Jesus? The one sentence to which we are all held is a life of both joy and sorrow. We can think of those moments where we want to cling to that which is comfortable, stable and familiar, yet we are called to be courageous and willing to take risks that may incur suffering. In the realm of love, we get a glimpse of the joyful experience of relationship at times, yet we are also dealt our share of sorrow and discomfort. In the words of Kahlil Gibran, we must not seek only "love's peace and love's pleasure". Similarly, we cannot cling to the transfiguration of Christ as Peter does. We must descend the mountain and live within the world of suffering while being reminded of Christ's coming glory. If we are to call ourselves Christians, we must relate to his divinity and humanity, his joy and his suffering. As Gibran murmurs in *The Prophet*, joy and sorrow are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed. Let us take solace in knowing that the deeper our sorrow runs, the more joy we can contain. Let Christ's identity as messiah and suffering servant help us to be open to the transforming experience of joy and suffering, let it help to make us open to the daily miracles and able to transform pain into strength and sorrow into an entryway to future joy.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

Go in peace to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do.

We are sent in Christ's name.

The Lord make glory shine upon you

And be gracious to you.

The Lord look upon you with favor

And give you peace, now and in the time to come.

Amen.