

Last Sunday after Epiphany Year B 2018 Sermon

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Much of what I share with you today comes from Dr. David Lose, "...in the Meantime" blog, "Transfiguration B: There Is No Plan", Posted: 09 Feb 2015.

When someone asks me what I think the function of a Christian minister is, I usually respond by saying something like, "I think one of the principal functions of *any* religious leader is to bring meaning; to take the ups and downs of human life and try to see where God may be *present* in it all in such a way as to make sense of our world and our place in it, in light of God's love." Elton Trueblood, physician, doctor of philosophy and chaplain at Harvard and Stanford, wrote: "Men and women can bear hardship, poverty, physical hunger and pain, but there is one thing which they cannot bear very long, and that is meaninglessness. If they are not provided with meaning in *one* connection, they will seek it in another." ¹

Pastor David Lose believes that "What drives our desire to find meaning... is that meaning provides stability. It offers us the assurance that the world is intelligible, orderly, and has value. **Apart** from this, the world seems not simply meaningless or chaotic, but hostile and even uninhabitable. And so we are *born* 'meaning-makers,' always seeking to lay some imaginative order on the various events and circumstances of our lives, often by fitting those events into a larger and meaningful *plan*." ²

In today's Gospel story, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and suddenly, as Mark describes it, Jesus is transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could ever bleach them. And there appears to them Elijah and Moses, who are talking with Jesus. Then Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three booths, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

What Peter does, as I suspect *any* of us would do, is immediately try to interpret what he is experiencing in terms of a conceptual framework he is familiar with. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets foretell the coming “Day of the Lord,” a day of Divine Judgment and Deliverance. Now, according to Jewish tradition, God was supposed to inaugurate the anticipated “Day of the Lord” during the Jewish Festival of Booths.³ And so when Peter sees his Lord transformed and now accompanied by Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the law and the prophets, he can only think that the “Day of the Lord” has come. And if the Day of the Lord is inaugurated during the Festival of Booths, perhaps the best thing for Peter to do is build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

But you see the problem: As is our human tendency, Peter instantly and instinctively tries to make sense of, and find meaning in, what he is seeing. Neurons are frantically firing throughout his brain trying to find the right cubby-hole to put this experience into. Peter – who throughout the Gospels represents us – tries to put this overpowering Mystery into his old, familiar conceptual framework, thereby confining its meaning to his own limited and totally inadequate understanding of what is happening. But it won’t work. Mark tells us, “He didn’t know what he was saying.” As Jesus once said, there must be new wineskins to hold new wine.

“Sometimes,” writes Dr. Lose, our “desire to find meaning isn’t helpful, particularly when we *impose our* meaning on someone else’s circumstances or struggles. Each of us has probably cringed when we heard the story of a parishioner who lost a child only to be told by another parishioner that God needed another angel in the heavenly choir. *This* kind of meaning-making can feel like an escape or, worse, like making someone who is already suffering pay for another person’s desire for meaning, order, and stability.”⁴

Speaking about our Gospel story, Dr. Lose notes that “Peter... has taken this momentous encounter with God’s prophets and fitted it into a pre-existing narrative and religious framework that helps him make sense of this otherwise inexplicable and somewhat terrifying event.

“Yet by doing so he comes perilously close to **missing** an encounter with God. For just after he stops speaking -- almost interrupting him, in fact -- a voice from heaven both announces and commands, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved. *Listen* to him!’ Peter wants to fit what is happening into a plan. God invites him instead to experience the wonder and mystery of Jesus.

“I wonder how often we do the same,” David Lose continues. “We desperately want an encounter with God – some sense that we are not alone, that there is something *more* than what we can see and touch – and yet in those very moments that God draws near we find ourselves afraid, unsure, and feeling suddenly very out of control, and so we try to domesticate our experience of the Holy by fitting it into a plan.

“Why? I suspect that as much as we **want** an encounter with God, we simultaneously *fear* the presence of God *because we fear being changed*, being transformed [which is what happens when we lay ourselves open to God]. What we *have*, who we are, may not be everything we want, but at least we know it, are used to it, have built a relatively orderly life around it. And so when God comes – perhaps not in a transfiguration as dramatic as *Mark* describes but in the ordinary hopes, encounters, and tragedies of our everyday life – when God comes and unsettles the orderly lives we’ve constructed, we try to put those disruptive experiences back into line by cramming them into [a framework,] a plan.

“But maybe, just maybe, there **is** no plan,” Dr. Lose suggests. “Maybe there’s only love.”⁵ Maybe there’s only love.

This week, Ash Wednesday will usher us into the season of Lent. Some of you may have observed Lent in your own particular way your whole life. Perhaps you fast, or abstain from chocolate or television, read a daily devotional, give alms to a favorite charity. You have a familiar plan. Others of you may have *never* experienced Lent before, don’t have a clue what it is or what it’s for. And I want to tell you: You are the fortunate ones!

For you see, I believe that Lent is a holy time when we intentionally open ourselves to God speaking, God coming, God transforming our lives; and this is more likely to happen during the 40 days of Lent when we have not already developed ingrained expectations – have not already put Lent into our pre-existing frameworks and interpretations. The 40 days of Lent are patterned after Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, where he is *removed* from his familiar environment, his familiar comforts, his accustomed routine – even his familiar, readily-available food and nourishment! The wilderness is a place of emptiness and vulnerability where we are most susceptible to having our minds and hearts changed and transformed, which is the true meaning of the word “repentance” – being transformed. And so one of the main purposes of Lent is to create, as it were, a kind of wilderness amidst the familiar, comfortable routines of our lives – a wilderness where we can be open and vulnerable to God coming to us in new, transformative ways.

So, for those of you who have never experienced Lent, or those of you who have never entered fully into Lent, I invite you to do so, beginning this week. Enjoy pancakes, butter, syrup and sausage this “fat Tuesday,” Mardi Gras, what we Anglicans call “Shrove Tuesday.” Have a cross of ashes marked on your forehead this Ash Wednesday, and contemplate your own mortality. Join us on Fridays in Lent, when we walk the Stations of the Cross, enjoy a simple meal of soup and salad, and open our minds to new ways of thinking during our Lenten Study.

And for those of you who have faithfully observed Lent for decades, I invite you to enter **this** Lent with a mind swept clean of expectations and interpretations, insofar as is possible. Enter the wilderness with Jesus, opening your minds and hearts to new ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting. **Behold** the Mystery of God and **listen** to the message it is speaking to you before you start putting your own interpretations and imposing your own meanings on the Mystery.

And so, I have had to revisit that question, “What is the function of a Christian minister?” For while I think there is still value in *interpreting* life’s vicissitudes in order to put them in a meaningful framework, I now believe there is an even greater function to which I am called. As David Lose puts it, the function “isn’t to fit our experience – let alone everyone else’s – into some kind of ‘divine plan,’ but rather to create space for people to experience the wonder and mystery of God” and to stand “together in the mystery of God and God’s love... [C]hurch should not be the place we look for order and stability but rather the place we meet up to share our stories of wonder and worry and hope and disappointment and stand with each other as the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus draws near once again to unsettle our plans and meet us in the mystery of God’s love.”⁶

AMEN

- 1 Elton Trueblood, *The Future of the Christian*, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 13-14
- 2 David Lose, *...in the Meantime* blog, “Transfiguration B: There Is No Plan”, Posted: 09 Feb 2015
- 3 see Zechariah 14:16-21
- 4 Lose, *ibid.*
- 5 Lose, *ibid.*
- 6 Lose, *ibid.*