

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 2021 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.

If someone were to ask me what I think the function of a priest is, as I understand it at this point in my life, I think I would say that one of my principal functions as a priest and preacher is to try 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 the light of God's love, the teachings of Jesus, and God's living word coming to us through Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of God in prayer, in one another, in God's creation, and within our own souls. Dr. Elton Trueblood, a Quaker scholar, author, and senior advisor to President Dwight Eisenhower, 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 so we are *born* 'meaning-makers,' always seeking to lay some... order on the various events and circumstances of our lives..." ² And one of the ways we do this is by trying to fit **new** experiences into the interpretive framework of our familiar past.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and suddenly, Jesus is transfigured before them. His clothes become dazzling white. And there appears to them Elijah and Moses, who are talking with Jesus. And Peter says to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three booths, three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." And then our Gospel tells us, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

When Peter is faced with this totally **new** experience, what he does, as I suspect many of **us** would do, is immediately try to interpret what he is experiencing through the lens of a conceptual framework of meaning that he is familiar with – in Peter’s case, his Jewish faith. Now, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets foretell the coming “Day of the Lord,” a day of Divine Judgment and Deliverance. According to Jewish tradition, God was supposed to *inaugurate* the anticipated “Day of the Lord” during the Jewish Festival of Booths (or Shelters).³ And so, when Peter sees the Lord transfigured, and accompanied by Moses and Elijah, who represent 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 to be inaugurated during the Festival of Booths, perhaps the best thing for Peter to do is build booths, shelters, for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

As is our human tendency, Peter instinctively tries to find meaning in what he is seeing, tries to find the right cubby-hole to put this Transfiguration experience into. He *tries* to put this overpowering Mystery into his old, familiar framework of meaning, thereby confining its meaning to his own limited and inadequate understanding of what is happening. But it won’t work. Mark tells us that Peter didn’t know what to say. In *last Sunday’s* sermon, I noted that, 3 times in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that the Messiah *must* suffer, be betrayed, and killed. But the disciples can never grasp the concept. There is no place whatsoever in their familiar religious framework into which they can place the concept of a suffering Messiah.

But, over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus proves that God is not confined to our familiar interpretive frameworks, religious or otherwise.

Near the very *beginning* of his ministry, Jesus says, “[N]o one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.” (Mark 2:22) Our fresh experiences of God may well require fresh frameworks of meaning.

“I suspect,” writes Dr. Lose, “that as much as we **want** an encounter with God, we simultaneously *fear* the presence of God *because we fear being changed*, being transformed. 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 familiar framework]...”⁴

My friends, I believe that at least *one* of the reasons that this past year has been so difficult for so many of us is that we **have** no familiar, interpretive framework of meaning into which our experience of this pandemic can be placed; no labeled cubby-hole in our storehouse of experiences into which **this** experience fits.

Almost *everything* about our encounter with this “novel coronavirus” is novel to us!

And we have seen examples of how difficult it is for some people to process such a **totally** unfamiliar experience. “The virus is a hoax,” some have said. Perhaps it is because they cannot accept something they could **never** fit into the familiar framework that gives stability to their lives? Perhaps it is because the uncontrollable nature of the virus flies in the face of their self-understanding as someone who is in control of their own life (or *should* be in control)? Perhaps this is why Peter, James, and John are *terrified* by this experience of God’s revelation in Jesus – because they are definitely **not** in control?

Now, while our attention in this Gospel story inevitably focuses on the glorious vision of Jesus Transfigured, there is another important part of this story that is easy to miss: the cloud which “overshadows” the 3 disciples. In a recent article,⁵ the Rev. Dr. Amy Richter points out that the Greek word translated “overshadowed” only appears in one other place in the 4 Gospels – and it’s not at all where we might expect. It appears in the story of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. As you remember, the angel appears and says to Mary, “[Y]ou will conceive in your womb and bear a son...” And Mary says to the Angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” And Gabriel responds, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you...” (Luke 1:26-35, NRSV) Talk about an experience *totally* outside **any** human framework! A virgin birth? And yet, Mary says, “Yes; let it be with me according to your word,” and she becomes the bearer of God, the place where God dwells.

Compare the response of Mary with that of Peter, James, and John when the power of the Most High overshadows *them*. Rather than receiving God into the dwelling of their hearts, their very selves, they want to build dwellings outside themselves. To keep God safely at arm’s length.

I can’t help but think that, if Mary had been there on the mountaintop with those three disciples, she would have responded to Peter’s offer to build 3 shelters by saying, “Don’t *build* shelters. *Be* shelters. *You be* the place where God dwells, the place from which God acts, the bearer of God’s light.”

It’s a totally different framework, this concept of being bearers of God, like Mary. But for those of us at all familiar with the Gospels, it is clearly not a **new** framework at all. “**You** are the light of the world,” Jesus tells his followers, from atop another mountain. (Matthew 5:14-16) And again he says to his followers, “The kingdom of God is **within** you.” (Luke 17:21, GW, TEV, NIV) We might call this, “The Gospel Framework,” the pattern of life lived by Jesus – a pattern of life lived at one with God, wherein we are open to whatever experience might come – including our *own* crosses – and are open to seeing God **in every** experience.

My friends, the pandemic looks different when we are living within the Gospel framework. The cross, Jesus says, is a *necessary* part of this Gospel framework – not that we **seek** it; but we can still see God *in* it. In my address to our Annual Parish Meeting two weeks ago, I cited a recent Pew Research survey which found that almost 3 in 10 Americans say that their faith has *grown* during the pandemic. What from our familiar, worldly framework *seems* an unmitigated disaster has turned out to be, for almost a third of us Americans, a time of meaning and growth as well as tragedy.

My friends, **none** of us knows what the future holds in the coming months and years. But most of the wise church and secular leaders whom I read say that it will not be possible to return to the old framework of meaning, pre-pandemic. Work will look different, the Church will look different, almost everything will be, in **some** way, different. So, we will have to find a different framework of meaning than the one we were so familiar with pre-pandemic. And what better framework of meaning could there be for us Christians than the Gospel framework, wherein even the clouds that overshadow us are the very place where we meet, and receive, God?

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 Amy Richter, “Transfiguration Happens,” *The Living Church*, December 31, 2020 https://livingchurch.org/2020/12/31/transfiguration-happens/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=0addaebba2-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_02_02_09_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0826f52b83-0addaebba2-128470037