

Sermon - Feb. 14, 2021

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:2–9

## The Transfiguration

**2** And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, **3** and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one<sup>[a]</sup> on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. **5** And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi,<sup>[b]</sup> it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” **6** For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son;<sup>[c]</sup> listen to him.” **8** And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

**9** And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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Grace, Mercy and peace to you from God the father of us and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

The Transfiguration of Jesus presents something of a challenge to preach because it is so unusual. Strange things happened on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus shines, Elijah and Moses show up... Very strange. What does that event mean for us?

This presents a bit of a challenge because the event is REAL, it happened, It's not a parable or a fiction or a myth. And yet what happened is NOT of this world. We don't usually allegorize or interpret symbolically REAL events.

But this story crosses over from the real to the SURREAL and is ripe with all kinds of symbolism.

The Divine Holy One of God is revealed in glowing light, along with two others, suggesting a sort of trinity.... high on a hilltop, from where Jesus will come down, only to be raised up on a cross and descend again, even into the grave, the pit of hell.

But He will not stay there. Once more He rises up and shows himself AGAIN to his disciples and returns to a mountain top and ascends into the heavens, from which He will return one day for us. On that day he put an end to suffering and pain for all time. And we who are believers in his story will also rise up to meet him in the air. And the

devil and his angels will be cast into the pit, and along with him, all those who refused to love the Lord while there was HERE.

Our story begins this way:

Having taken his disciples, Peter, James and John, up on a mountain, Jesus was transfigured before them...

Why only three disciples? And why these three specifically? We may never know. I will suggest they were chosen because Jesus wanted three witnesses. Under the law two would probably have been enough, but there is something holy in the number 3. Peter, James and John seem to serve as the perceived group leaders. And apart from that I think they might represent personality types, sort of like Dorothy's friends in the Wizard of Oz, the Scarecrow, the Tinman and the Cowardly Lion. Peter is impulsive and, like the lion, he acts from his gut. John is the romantic and, like the Tinman, he acts from his heart, James is the thinker and, like the Scarecrow, he acts from his head. They are all types and very likely they stand in for us, in some way.

And while they were on the mountain, Jesus' clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared with them on the mountain, Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

How do we know this is Elijah and Moses? We are told who they are. Did the disciples KNOW who they were or maybe they had to be TOLD? In any case they are aware of who is with Jesus. And knowing who they are goes a long way to explaining their emotional state... which Mark tells us is that of awe or FEAR.

Why Elijah and Moses? For the Lutheran conclusion it's obvious... Moses as a prophet represents the LAW. Elijah as a prophet represents the Promises of God. So together with Jesus we have the manifestation of LAW and GOSPEL.

The three of them together form a type of heavenly council. What else would you call it? I suppose a trinity of some type is being represented or merely suggested... are we to make something of that? Or simply take notice, call it a happy coincidence, and move on?

What is this whole event all ABOUT?

Certainly, Jesus is revealing something of importance to his three disciples, something that will be beneficial for them later on. The Gospel writer is letting us in on the event... showing us who Jesus is... truly IS... The Son of God.

And I think that I want to focus on Peter's question. Or the preamble to his question mostly... "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."

The rest of what Peter says is probably nonsense. St. Mark tells us that Peter said all this without really knowing what he should say, for they (the disciples) were terrified.

Gobsmacked... *flabbergasted, amazed, astounded, "literally "mouth-slapped" stunned.*

That we find Peter asking Jesus to STAY shouldn't surprise us. I think we hear Peter say this frequently. What I hear Peter saying is that it is GOOD to BE HERE... We should STAY... Let's not ever leave this place.

Let me set the scene for you. Imagine that you have been cast in a big budget movie... The Transfiguration Story... and you are cast to play the role of Peter in the movie. (Now that it's 2021... you can recast as a woman, if it suits you...) It's a big part but this is your ONLY LINE. Your big break. How are you going to say these words... "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."

If you're going to deliver them correctly don't you have to know what they mean? Why should we worry what they mean if PETER himself wasn't even sure what he was saying? That's a fair question. But what thought was Peter at least TRYING to communicate? I tend to think of Peter as acting from his gut... instinctual, primitive.

In this opening sentence, Peter is being absolutely genuine, even if the rest of his words are nonsense. These words, "It's good for us to be here," come from his center. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."

If I diagram this sentence I notice something... Seemingly, the two most inconsequential words in this sentence begin and end it: Rabbi and HERE.

Rabbi is the Indirect Object of the sentence... And if we removed it, the sentence would seem to make total sense without it. Yes, he is addressing Jesus, but as a declaration it's not all that important who Peter is speaking to.

The declaration that: "It is good for US" is the main clause.... And communicates the thought all by itself.

The sentence ends with a subordinate clause "to be HERE" and so "HERE" could be understood as inconsequential to the main idea being expressed. Because it is subordinate... as such it is less important.

And so, the words "Jesus" (Rabbi) and "Here" could be thought of as little or no importance to the main idea being expressed... which is... "it is GOOD" for "US."

The Direct Object of the main clause in the sentence is "US."

The main SUBJECT of the sentence is, oddly enough, an adjective, although it's being used here as a noun... (IT) IS GOOD;

GOOD is the Subject... The Verb in the clause is TO BE...

Therefore the main clause is simple "IT is GOOD. (subject and verb) For US (direct object)"

Before we ask the question of the meaning of GOOD, I would point out that these words are at the heart of every misery of the human race from the time of Adam, the declaration that "SUCH AND SUCH.... Is good for us."

"It is GOOD FOR US!" By itself, the main clause almost sounds sinful. How many awful things are experienced whenever one group says over another? "It is Good For US."

Look around the world today at how many people are saying "IT is Good for US."

It doesn't change much if you include the subordinate clause TO BE HERE... It's still problematic... apart from JESUS... It is Good for US TO BE HERE.... sounds a lot like "I'm King of the Mountain" or "Me first."

But what does GOOD mean in the way Peter is using it? The kind of GOOD which Peter uses here is the kind of good which speaks of beauty in the appearance of an object... BUT NOT merely the outward sign of beauty, for this a beauty which comes from within an object or a person... A type of beauty which shines through from the CORE. So that what is SEEN is manifested from what was unseen.... inward good, nobility, honorable in character; worthy, and can be plainly seen to be so. *attractively good; inspirationally good; That which* is lovely through to the core (praiseworthy); moving, winsome (appealing).

How fitting a description for transfiguration.... The purity which shines forth in Jesus from the core of his being.

Earlier I said that seemingly, the two most inconsequential words in this sentence, begin and end it: Jesus and Here. And I was intentional when I said that, because appearances CAN be deceiving.

It's GOOD to remember that Jesus often puts the last things first... and the first things last. And He has the greater serve the lesser... Jesus himself is like that. The Great God and powerful, eternal God, serving his undeserving creatures... The Scarecrows and Tinmen and Cowardly beasts...

And the least little words in this sentence frame it: Jesus and HERE. Everything else is in the middle of these little words... and is INFORMED by them.

But Peter is being earnest. Rabbi, It is Good for US to BE HERE.... begs another question. Where is HERE, exactly? In Peter's case it was being limited to the top of the mountain in the company of Jesus, and his friends in the company of Moses and Elijah.

HERE with JESUS... those two inconsequential words are of MAGNUM importance.

Without JESUS being HERE... "It is GOOD for US" doesn't really mean all that much. Without JESUS being HERE... even "IT IS GOOD for US TO BE" doesn't give us much hope for the future... eventually someone will come along and push us off the mountain.

With Jesus... Here... can now be anywhere. It's not simply limited to Peter and his friends located somewhere in time and space... It raises questions these days when we can ask "Where is HERE?" When "Here" can be virtual space. Gathering together in a physical location seems to be the direct object... the main clause... but when times are difficult perhaps there is use for the subordinated clauses of virtual community. Those questions are for another day. For today, it is important to SEE JESUS, HERE for US. In His WORD and in his Sacraments. Amen.