

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all place the Transfiguration of Jesus at (roughly) the midpoint of their gospels. This is a powerful literary technique; Jesus undergoes a major physical transition at a point in the gospel narratives where his ministry is also transitioning its focus. From this point on the gospel narratives (Luke especially¹), emphasize that Jesus is now inexorably headed to Jerusalem...to the cross and tomb.

The Transfiguration scene can therefore be understood as a transitional event in the life and ministry of Jesus. And if there's anything we humans need to be taught how to handle...it's transition...or, more simply, change. We're not great with change, are we? Which is odd, since much of simply existing as a human being involves change. We have clearly been created to change and grow and adapt. But for all that, we're still not great at it. Luckily, scripture is rife with examples of God giving humanity exactly what we need; including the teachings we need to navigate life in healthier and more righteous ways if we're willing to listen.

In the chapters leading up to Mark 9 Jesus has been operating mostly in the northern part of Palestine, Galilee and its environs, along with some trips to gentile areas like the Tyre and Sidon, the region of the Gerasenes, and the Roman region known as the Decapolis. He has been preaching and teaching, healing, casting out demons, and feeding the hungry thus far in Mark's Gospel. But after the Transfiguration there will be a shift in focus.

Jesus has just predicted his death for the first time in Mark 8, he's going to do it again at the end of this chapter too. Jesus has been doing powerful works of restoration and wholeness; he's been drawing large crowds and impacting people's lives in powerfully positive ways. But now that all changes. The

¹ "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Luke 9:51 (NRSVue)

focus shifts. What he's been doing thus far has been amazing and great and wonderful. But it is, ultimately, not enough to break through our stubborn refusal to be loved and claimed by God.

Coming down from the mountain, Jesus is now headed in a new direction. Now, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. Now Jesus is headed to betrayal and arrest. Now Jesus is headed to false justice. Now Jesus is headed to torture and humiliation. Now Jesus is headed to thorns and spear. Now Jesus is headed to the cross and tomb. Now Jesus is headed to death.

Jesus continues to do all the things he did before, the healing and teaching, exorcisms and miracles. But it's all different now, there's something of a cloud over things. A cloud alarming enough for Peter to rebuke Jesus the first time it makes an appearance. The Andrew Lloyd Weber musical, "Jesus Christ: Superstar" does a brilliant job of illustrating this shift in the song "Hosanna" which marks Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The song starts off with the crowds singing Christ's praises, much like they were likely doing when he was healing and feeding people; but at the end it changes and the lyrics which were so full of praise shift and we hear this instead: "Hey JC, JC won't you fight for me?" and then "Hey JC, JC won't you die for me?" while the accompanying music shifts too, introducing a melancholic tone to the song.

All of this is to emphasize what Jesus might have been going through in Mark 9, in this period of transition. And what does he do to deal with all this transition? He goes off to a deserted place with some close friends. While there he receives words from Moses and Elijah, the great Lawgiver and Prophet. Words of advice? Comfort? Encouragement? We don't get to know. But words of Law and Prophecy given to the fulfillment of all Law and Prophecy. Jesus does not ignore the past, but he is not trapped in it either.

Then Jesus is affirmed in his mission and ministry by the very voice of God, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"² Being grounded in his identity, Jesus departs the mountain and immediately gets back to the healing and restoring work of God. But now that work is secondary, still vital, but the cross is more important still. Illustrating, once and for all, God's love for the cosmos with arms extended wide on the cross...that is Christ's aim now, his focus.

So, I started this sermon off by suggesting we learn from the example of Christ in transition here in Mark. What might that look like? In times of

² Mark 9:7c

transition, it is important for us to get away from distractions and noise. We can and should seek advice from close friends and people we trust. Looking to the past is not a bad thing either, so long as we understand that the future may be quite different, and we cannot get trapped in nostalgia. But perhaps the most important lesson I think we can learn from Jesus about transitions is to be grounded in our identity and step out into the new from that knowledge.

Peter does a great job of showing us what not to do in times of transition. He wants to stay on the mountaintop...make the Transfiguration the end rather than one step on the journey to the cross. He has been affirmed in his discipleship after all, the presence of Moses and Elijah proves that he's hitched his wagon to the right horse, so may as well try to capture that and live in this beautiful, dazzling moment forever. Right?

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"³ God gives us what we need to live in healthy and righteous ways. Even as Christ navigates mission and ministry, life and connection, he shows us how we might better navigate it too. The Way of Christ is a gift for humanity as it shows us how to live as we were made to. It shows us how to live, confident in God's love for us and God's claiming of us.

What transition are you facing right now? I am confident that every one of you is facing some sort of change or transition. It may be a small and positive one, like starting a new hobby. Or maybe it's a big and challenging one, like getting laid off and facing unemployment. But the Way of Christ can speak to both and the myriad in between. It can speak to your reality...to your transition too.

So, consider getting away to a quiet spot...hang out with some friends...consult people you trust...reflect on your journey thus far...consider wider perspectives...attend to your relationship with your Creator...ground yourself in your identity...then go! Step out in the faith that you will never walk alone. Christ goes with you, along with the body of Christ...all those others walking the Way too.

Faith is forged in responding to God's call...in walking the Way. And God's call, Christ's Way, often leads us to the new and the different, the unknown and the uncertain. Thanks be to God that we can learn from Christ's example...that we can listen to him as we seek to follow his Way. So let me

³ Ibid.

end with this prayer, known as the Call of Abraham prayer and invite you to consider the Way that Christ forged, even through transition and change, even through darkness and death:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen