

Sermon for Last Epiphany B

February 15, 2015

St. Mark's Episcopal Church (Alexandria, Va.)

Mark 9:2-9

Spoiling the Ending

I like M. Night Shyamalan movies. He's a director famous for surprise endings, with a twist at the end. You're going along, watching the movie, and you're pretty certain you know what the story is. And then BOOM! Something comes out of nowhere. Perhaps the most famous is "The Sixth Sense." And spoiler alert...but this movie is more than 15 years old so if you haven't seen it...too bad.

In the movie, there is a boy who is haunted or tormented, and he is working with a psychotherapist to help him. And then of course, we hear the boy's famous secret: "I see dead people." Now we know what's going on. But then, at the end, the twist comes. It is revealed to us that Bruce Willis, the psychotherapist, is himself a dead person. He's a ghost!

Now, watching one of these movies the second time isn't as exciting. If you already know the ending, if you already know the big twist, then you watch the whole thing with the end in mind. You get stuck trying to figure out how all of the little plot points lead to the twist, and you don't enjoy them as they happen. It's hard to step back and appreciate the journey once you know the ending.

And that's our struggle as Christians. We know the surprise ending. Jesus is risen from the dead, and victorious over sin, death, and pain. So when we read through Mark's Gospel again, knowing the ending, we look at the stories differently. Like the Transfiguration. Of course Jesus is dazzling white. Of course Jesus is full of divine power. As my kid's say..."no duh!" The resurrection proved that, so this must be some kind of literary foreshadowing of the coming twist. We know the ending, so we think we know what this story today is about.

But that is to miss the real power of what is happening on top of the mountain. This mysterious appearance witnessed by Peter, James, and John. What is most important here, in a sense, is not what Jesus looks like. There is something else going on here. But what exactly is it that's going on?

The first hint we get is that the people appearing on the mountain with him are Elijah and Moses. Now, that may seem a bit random. Sure, they're important people, but why would they be on the mountain with Jesus?

First of all, in the biblical worldview, mountains are "thin places" between earth and heaven. You're closer to heaven, in a sense. It's a thin spot between divine and human. A thin spot between God and man. So Jesus takes his friends up to this thin place, and Elijah and Moses join.

Elijah and Moses are two people that have been to the top of the mountain to meet with Jesus. Both of them have spoken with God face to face. The Bible says Moses spoke with God "as a friend." And Elijah, hidden in a cave on the top of a mountain, hears the "still, small voice" of God. So Moses and Elijah are two of the few people that we know from scripture have spoken with God. They have heard God's voice, and God has heard theirs.

So the three of them, Elijah, Moses, and Jesus, are talking. But are they talking to someone else? Are they talking to God? No! Elijah and Moses are talking with Jesus. Because Jesus is God. When they speak with Jesus they are speaking with God. Jesus is revealed, not just as a guy who has miraculously clean clothes. Jesus is revealed as being, in the flesh, that thin space between God and man. The thin space between divinity and humanity. The thin space between grace and need. The thin space between life and death.

It is Jesus. Moses and Elijah speak to him because he speaks for God. He is God.

What does that mean for you and me? It means that when we speak to Jesus, when we pray to Jesus, when we have Jesus in our midst in the sacrament, God is with us. Emmanuel. Jesus is the thin space between our sin, pain, and death, and God's forgiveness, grace, and life.

That's who Jesus is revealed to be on this mountain.

Now Peter, who's a little slow on the uptake as usual, addresses Jesus as rabbi. He misses the point completely. He sees Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus...talking to God...and he misses the point. He calls Jesus rabbi. Now, to give you a hint, Jesus doesn't really like it when people call him rabbi. It's not a good sign. In the Bible, when you hear someone calling Jesus rabbi, it usually means that person is not in a right relationship with God.

You might also take that out into our modern world. When people see Jesus as just a moral teacher, as a good example, as a rabbi, they are missing the point. Jesus is God, with the power to deliver what he promises.

So Peter's response, he wants to build a camp and stay. It's almost like he's trying to look busy, because he is missing the point. He wants to do something else, instead of doing what God the Father is about to tell them to do: "Listen to him." It's like with a child, or at least my children, when I have to say, "no, put it down, and listen to me. Stop what you are doing, and listen to me."

If Jesus is just one teacher among many, if he is just one voice among many, it's easy to tune him out, as we are busy doing other things. Busy doing whatever we think is more important, rather than listening to him. Stopping what we're doing, and simply being awed by the wonder of his presence.

Of course, the story goes on. Peter, getting it wrong, is corrected by God the Father. From the cloud – and again, this signals the cloud that was on Mount Sinai with Moses, signifying

God's presence. They are in the presence of almighty God, now surrounding Jesus. Jesus is at the center of the cloud of glory and wonder.

And the Father says, "this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" And this phrase is what is going to point forward and explain what is really happening here.

In Mark's Gospel, we'll hear this phrase three times. We heard it five weeks ago at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, where Jesus comes up out of the water and God the Father says, "this is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." At the point of Jesus' greatest identification and total solidarity with the human need for relationship with God, in baptism, God says, "this is my Son. This is my beloved. This is me...among you."

And we're going to hear this phrase again in a couple of weeks, on Palm Sunday. Coming from the lips of the centurion as he witnesses Jesus' dead body on the cross, he'll say, "Truly this man was God's Son." At the moment of Jesus' greatest identification and total solidarity with the human need for life, he is declared God's son.

You see, it's not just about being forgiven. Because we're always going to sin again. So we're forgiven, and we sin again. No, what we need is God's final answer to sin and death. What we need is God's total identification with us in Christ Jesus.

We need God to go through death with us. And that is what Jesus came to do.

We don't get to hear it in the lectionary, but right before they climb this mountain, Jesus says to Peter: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." And in that part, again, Peter didn't get it. He says, "Lord, this shouldn't happen to you."

This is what the experience on the mountain points to. Jesus is God's beloved Son. And it as Beloved Son, as the fullness of grace and power, that Jesus surrenders to the power of evil and

death. It is because Jesus is filled with God's infinite love, God's infinite life, that he can enter in to death and come out on the other side. He can show that evil and death do not have the last word.

What this story points to is that Jesus is as much God's beloved son on the Mount of Calvary as he is on Mount Tabor in the Transfiguration. And that is what Peter, and I, and maybe you, have so much trouble understanding.

He is just as loved on the cross as he is on the mountaintop. He is just as loved when he is naked and broken and bleeding as he is when he is in gleaming white robes. Indeed, what Peter had to come to understand, what we have to understand, is that Jesus is quintessentially loved in the cross. It is on the cross where Jesus dazzles the most with God's glory. It is on the cross where God's love shines most brightly. Not a mountaintop, surrounded by a cloud, where only his three best friends can see him. But in front of all who witnessed it, in front of those who hated him the most. That is where God shines brightest. That is where the Beloved comes through.

As we enter into Lent this week, I challenge us to follow along in Christ's story. And the Transfiguration is a great part of the story, no doubt. But always remember that we know the surprise ending: God, through Jesus Christ, will go through death -- he will go through hell, literally -- to bring us through to life.

Amen