

Mark 9:2-9 "Is It Too Soon?" Rev. Janet Chapman 2/11/24

One thing you learn early on when you house a high schooler from Spain is that Europe's word for football is not our football, it is soccer. Not too long after welcoming Laia, and learning that her brother played football, I wanted to share a story with her about two Brazilian football teams (mind you we are talking soccer here) playing one another in a much-advertised game. One team lost to the other... and it all started in the first 3 seconds of the game. The Corinthian team scored its first goal... while the goalie for Rio Preto was still on one knee, head bowed praying for victory. It seems there is a time to pray and a time to play. She politely smiled and I wandered to myself, maybe it's just too soon to impress her with my humor?

Timing is everything as the author of Ecclesiastes tells us. There is a time for everything under heaven, a time for tearing down and a time for building up, a time for crying and a time for laughing... and so on. It is the same in what we call the church calendar, the Christian year. It started with Advent and preparing for the birth of the Messiah, then the season of Epiphany during which the identity of Jesus is revealed in various ways. During the season of Epiphany, we read about Jesus' baptism and the voice from heaven that says, "This is my son, my beloved in whom I delight." Now we are at the last Sunday of Epiphany and that voice once more speaks. Jesus first mentions his approaching death and a voice from heaven reminds Peter, James, and John, "But this is who he really is... my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" The curtain is lifted and they witness the dazzling splendor of the transfiguration. It comes at the right time in the unfolding story of Jesus, but Dr. Fred Craddock points out that it is way too soon for Peter, James, and John. They're not ready. They're afraid, filled with thoughtless chatter, senseless statements, and an awkwardness that is all too familiar.

If you have ever had anyone tell you that the Bible is boring and dry, that the whole book is full of holier-than-thou people whose experiences have nothing to do with ours, then here's a good story to share from the perspective of the disciples. The story is told in Matthew, Mark & Luke as Jesus takes three of his disciples with him one day on a little hike. Up the mountain they go, talking about all the things that have transpired. Peter is super

enthusiastic, your typical adult with Attention Deficit, who just can't stop talking. James and John are more reflective, wondering if this career choice they made is really going to pay off as they'd hoped. The text says that suddenly along the way, Jesus was transfigured before them. I'm not sure exactly what that means, something like changing figure or form. The word transfigured is hard to explain and honestly, trying to make sense of it seems a bit like a waste of time. When did the idea of a brilliantly glowing holy figure ever "make sense" anyway? The transfigured Jesus isn't supposed to be figured out, he's supposed to be appreciated. It's kind of like Annie Dillard writes in her bestseller "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," as she shares stories of doctors who performed early cataract surgery in Europe. When a doctor removed bandages from one girl's eyes, she saw "a tree with lights in it." These words sent Dillard on her own journey as she wrote, "It was for this tree that I searched the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all, and I saw that tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the doves roost, charged and transfigured... I stood on the grass with lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance...". Dillard concludes, "That vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it." Maybe you remember a time when you sensed the presence of the Holy in your own life? Perhaps you never told anyone about it – "it was less like seeing, than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance." Can you appreciate something like that? And yet even here, there is a bit of humor as only the gospel author Mark adds Jesus' clothes were amazingly bright, "brighter than if they had been bleached white." "Bleached white?" Where did that come from – now the Bible is giving us tips on laundry hacks, some off-handed plug for Clorox? You never know when you are going to stumble upon everyday life in the Bible.

The awkwardness continues in Mark as we witness the disciples completely caught off guard. Some say they should have been ready because they have seen what Jesus has done with exorcisms, healings, walking on water, feeding multitudes, even raising a 12-year-old girl from the dead. But for the disciples, it feels too soon to witness such a thing, too much to

take in. So Peter's first response is to say, "Hey, let's build something!" Now is the time to build, as Ecclesiastes would say, and Peter seizes the bull by the horns. It's like he's saying, "Let's make three monuments, tangible structures by which we can remember this experience. Moses and Elijah are giving legitimacy to Jesus so now we know we're on the right path. Let's hang on with all we've got to this shining, illuminating moment where we see God clearly and the darkness of our lives is banished, once and for all." The irony was that the disciples had only gotten a brief glimpse of what life would be like in Jesus' footsteps. There would be hard work to come as they headed back down the mountain, after experiencing this thing which seemed too much, too hard to explain or talk about.

Thomas deQuincey once said of William Wordsworth that he had such a love affair with nature that sometimes he would go out on a beach and when he would see the evening sun sizzle into the sea, he would become so overwhelmed, he would distract himself by counting rocks or counting trees or estimating distances. What was he doing? Same thing I do when I walk on the beach at sunset as the colors consume the horizon and the magnitude simply takes my breath away, so much so that I start searching for rocks or shells – protecting myself; the grandeur is too much. When the great conductor Toscanini had finished 60 rehearsals of Bellini's "Norma," at the dress rehearsal he put down the baton and said, "The concert is canceled." Why? He responded, "The music is too great; it's beyond human powers, I can't do it." Do you know what he's talking about?

Maybe you know that moment – a moment where you've been seeking God, searching for comfort, answers, hope, community. It can happen in your own neighborhood where, for a moment or two, you find it, you find that much-needed solace, you are grafted into relationships that heal, and you come to see new ways of interplay between God and the world. And we want to hang on tight to those feelings of clarity and purpose, so we build buildings, erect monuments, hold meetings, and write bylaws to make sure we've captured a little bit of God, that light will shine forever and make everything ok. So we know how Peter feels, bless his heart, as he suggests a monument-building campaign. It's happened to me more than once at church camp, sometimes on the first or second day of camp. I'm still getting the feel of things, adjusting to my surroundings, and a camper comes up to me and

asks, "Is it true the adults who come here aren't paid, you choose to be here just because you care about us, you see God in us?" This 8-year-old had asked his cabin counselor why the counselor had come to camp because this camper said he didn't have a choice so he didn't understand why anyone who had a choice would come. I answered this young one, "Yes, some give up a week of pay, some a week of being with family, some the comforts of home, just because of kids like (him). There is nowhere else we would rather be than with (him), showing him how loved (he) is without any strings attached, how God wants (him) to feel that love utterly and completely." His eyes were wide as he just shook his head. It was too much to comprehend. But by the end of the week, he came up with tears in his eyes and said, "I get it now. I can't explain it, but I get it."

On the night before Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, he stood with Moses on the mountaintop. God had allowed Moses to see the promised land from the top of Mt. Nebo even though Moses would never enter that land. That stormy night in Memphis, Dr. King entered the cloud with Moses saying, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Dr. King's vision comes and goes, sometimes it mostly goes. It is fleeting in a world where more black men are now in prison than were enslaved in 1850 – it's not that they commit more crimes, but they suffer far more arrests and convictions. So we must live for King's vision with all we've got. We must live into that dream so that racism which disfigures us all will be transfigured.

This is just a part of the hard work that must be done when we follow Jesus down from the mountain. You can't just come down the mountain and say, "Guess what I saw today." Can't do that, because timing is everything. There is more of the story to come, there are struggles to be fought, visions to become real, and trees filled with lights still to behold. But Jesus whispers to us, "Don't worry about it. I will lead you into Lent, into Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter morning. I think then you may be able to tell of what you've seen and heard."