

Sermon for Sunday 14 February 2021 @ Bethesda UMChurch/Baltimore
Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Transfiguration Sunday
Scriptures: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9
"This way..."

On this last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we move from the first chapter of this shortest of the four Gospels, to the center of Mark's gospel.

All the surrounding scriptures for this Sunday serve as background to Mark's passage. The reading from 2 Kings has similar dramatic elements: The elevation of Elijah, the fiery cloud, the voice... The psalm echoes the awe of Elisha and the prophetic fellowship; the brief section of Paul's letter to the church @ Corinth uses the word, "glory," that comes through everything ...

This is a day of awe. The "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James, and John, are shown a glimpse of Jesus' standing beyond all his teaching and personal appeal they and so many others have already experienced. As at his baptism, Jesus does not speak ... the voice is beyond anything personal between people ... and then the moment passes, and they go back down the mountain.

I often say these days, much more than in my earlier decades of preaching, that we are called to fellowship with other revelations of holiness in our time. God is working outside Christianity in closer contact with us than ever before In the other two Abrahamic faiths, the Muslims and the Jews ... and also in other great religious traditions we have not been aware of, although in seminary we studied them briefly and were encouraged to look upon God's work as a global and historical fact to be honored and, wherever possible, cooperated with. Even closer to us is the experience of many who have no religious affiliation, the difference that makes for our ministry, and our call to love and respect God's work beyond our own understanding.

So for me, this annual moment in our tradition has heightened power, as we see the curtain pulled back for a moment in our story, and watch the disciples respond, and see how the early church integrates its trust and grasp of what was happening, as they prayed and grew and organized and struggled to obey and teach the Good News that turned their lives around.

Just a hint ... just a moment ... were given ... are given to us ... and then the world comes back into focus, and more is faced along familiar paths and in new developments

There is another aspect of this day to take seriously. As the commentator* reflected in my readings on this passage from Mark, "Gospel writers reveal their intent either in how a story is told or in when it is told; that is, where it is in the narrative." In this case, Mark puts the Transfiguration event in the center of his Gospel ... Mark 8:22-10:52. That section "opens with the healing of a blind man and ends with the healing of a blind man"... "In between, however, the disciples remain blind. Three times Jesus predicts his death" (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34) "but on each occasion the disciples amply demonstrate their inability to accept a cross and death as being anything but a contradiction of all that messiah and kingship mean...After all, how can

persons who have lived with the motto, 'when the messiah comes, there will be no misery' understand suffering and death as kingdom experiences?"

We teach ourselves ... over and over in our readings, and in our special days in the liturgy ... in hopes that God's word, so generously and carefully and courageously produced and preserved for us, over the generations and through the translations and in the times of slavery and the times of elevation and prosperity, in all the racial settings and under all governments that our faith has endured in all this way of ours, in hopes that we may be given the grace and wisdom to see God working, and to learn the humility and glory of Jesus in our time and way. "This way..." spoken to us so tenderly, calling us to grow, giving ourselves, training one another up, accepting the calls each of us has to do unique service, along with all the others who, by God's grace, also give and serve and grow in love.

This is not the limelight we Christians have long had in Western civilization, and until recently, in the United States. It is a new path. I think it is a great sign of progress for us, that we are rubbing shoulders with so many other faiths, and living our faith alongside so many who are not persuaded our way. Specifically in our national political situation, we are invited to be leaven and salt of the earth in new ways. New work. Greater self-knowledge. More forgiveness. Incredible variety of opportunity.

Amen.

*Quotations from Fred B. Craddock in "Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B" Trinity Press International, 1993, Harrisburg, Pa.