

February 11, 2024
Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“In the Presence of the Lord”

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

History Happened Here.

Over the years, I have taken several routes in my travels to and from my home state of New Jersey. While each of these routes have their advantages, I have found that taking the New York State Thruway offers what the other highways lack: rest areas that can be accessed easily from the road. On other routes, finding a gas station or place to eat means getting off and searching for miles through unfamiliar areas; on the Thruway, all these services are easily available, and getting back on the road is also very simple. While most of the rest areas on the Thruway (like the OnRoute rest stops on Highway 401) are very similar, some of them have unique qualities that reflect the area in which they are situated. I discovered this during one of my trips to my home state when the road sign that advised travelers that a rest area was coming up included, along with a listing of restaurants and other amenities, a sign that informed travellers that “*history happened here.*” When I first saw this, the wise guy inside of me commented “of course it did – history has happened everywhere!” But when I pulled into the parking lot and got out of my car, I discovered what this sign meant: near the entrance to the rest area was a historical marker informing the public that an important event in the establishment of the Erie Canal happened near this spot. While history has happened everywhere, this sign was memorializing an important event in the history of New York State and the expansion of trade into regions that had previously been unreachable. It was a place in which a significant event in American history was remembered.

It is quite common to come upon historical markers that inform us about important events that happened on particular sights, events that have shaped the present world in which we live. In my home state, there are several markers that remember occasions when George Washington visited locations throughout the region (leading to a common joke that George Washington slept so many places that markers should be erected in the places where he *did not* sleep!). When we lived in Niagara Falls, we discovered several historical markers that remember major battles in the War of 1812; when I was in seminary in Philadelphia, I would often take visitors to the Old City to visit Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, significant places in the

establishment of the United States of America. We erect monuments and markers to memorialize places of importance in the history of our nations, events that continue to shape our lives and impact the way we live in the modern world.

In the place we call the Holy Land, a land that continues to be plagued by war, violence, and destruction on an unimaginable scale, there are several places that memorialize significant events in the life of Jesus Christ. In Bethlehem, the Church of the Nativity was erected in the place where it was believed Jesus was born; in Jerusalem, pilgrims continue to throng to the *Via Dolorosa*, the path upon which Jesus carried his Cross on the way to his death at Golgotha, as well as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where it was believed he was buried. The Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane are places frequently mentioned in the Gospel, and visitors can walk along the shores of the Sea of Galilee that played such an important role in the life and ministry of our Lord. Throughout this historical yet troubled land, it can truly be said for followers of Jesus Christ that our history happened here.

Among all the places that memorialize historical events in the life and ministry of Jesus, there is one significant omission: the mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus reveals his full identity to three of his disciples. While this event, which we remember today, is included in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), you will not find the place where this happened on any itinerary of sights that Christian pilgrims visit on trips to the Holy Land. This omission is not by accident but is in keeping with the Gospel accounts of what happened when Jesus led his three disciples “*up a high mountain apart, by themselves*” (Mark 9:2).

Today’s Gospel lesson begins with the phrase “*six days later,*” linking what is about to happen to the previous events that include the divine testimony that Jesus is God’s beloved Son (“*He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’*” – 8:29); the predicted glory of the coming Son of Man (“*Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*” – 8:38); and the instruction to tell no one that Jesus is the Messiah (“*And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*” – 8:30). The three disciples who are chosen to accompany Jesus up the mountain are among the first who were called to “*follow me and I will make you fish for people*” (1:17). They also witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead (“*He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James*” – 5:37) and will be the three disciples that accompany Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours preceding his arrest, condemnation, and crucifixion (“*He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and*

agitated” – 14:33). Jesus leads the three disciples “*up a high mountain apart, by themselves,*” mountains being places of epiphanic disclosures throughout the Bible, especially in the story of Moses:

- “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” – Exodus 3:1-2.

As Moses comes into God’s presence in the burning bush on Mount Horeb, the three disciples are led up the mountain where they experience an epiphany, a sudden manifestation of the divine. While throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus has been presented as an intensely human being who experiences pity, anger, hunger, and weariness, on this mountain the fullness of Jesus’ divine glory is revealed: “*And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*” (9:3). As he is transfigured before his disciples, Jesus expresses no emotion, takes no action, and speaks no words. Instead, he appears in glory, the passive object of a metamorphosis that reveals his inner nature to his innermost circle of disciples. The brightness of Jesus’ garments evokes the light of the *shekinah*, the divine presence perceived in the Old Testament in the pillar of fire, on the mountain, in the sanctuary, and in apocalyptic visions:

- “Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” – Exodus 34:29.

Details of this *theophany*, appearance of God to God’s people, also evoke several other Old Testament accounts of revelations of divine glory to God’s people:

- “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” – Exodus 24:15-18.

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- “As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was pure as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.” – Daniel 7:9.

As Jesus transfigured before his disciples, “*there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus*” (9:4). These two figures represent the major elements of the Scriptures of the Jewish people: Moses the lawgiver, and Elijah the great prophet of the Lord (in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus informs his audience that they should “*not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*” – Matthew 5:17). Moses and Elijah are also significant because they were considered two of the three figures (Enoch being the third) whom Jews considered alive in the presence of God:

- “Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day.” – Deuteronomy 34:5-6.
- “As [Elijah and Elisha] continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” – 2 Kings 2:11.

In most instances of epiphanies in the Bible, the human recipients of such a revelation are typically thrown into a state of fear or confusion (“*Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified*” – Luke 2:9). In the Transfiguration, however, there is no report of any such reaction from the three disciples. Instead, Peter speaks for the trio, addressing the transfigured Jesus as “*Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*” (9:5). Peter may have been thinking of the Feast of Booths (*Sukkoth*), when the people of Israel were called to remember their years of wandering in the wilderness in which they lived in booths: “*it is a solemn assembly; you shall not work at your occupations*” (Leviticus 23:36). Peter may have also wanted to memorialize this momentous occasion, erecting permanent dwellings so that future generations could come to this place where this manifestation of the glory of the Lord was revealed. Whatever his motivation may have been, Mark makes it clear that “*he did not know what to say, for they were terrified*” (9:6). For Mark, the primary point is to demonstrate Peter’s lack of understanding of what he is witnessing. Jesus’ clear supremacy over these two giants of Jewish history should have permitted his disciples to understand that Jesus was no mere lawgiver or prophet; he is “*true God, begotten of the Father in*

eternity” (*Small Catechism*). Since Moses and Elijah dwell with God in heaven, the erection of dwellings on the mountain does not make sense:

- “The God who delivered Moses and Elijah will certainly be with Jesus and his disciples. The living presence of Moses and Elijah also reminds us that Jesus is not merely a great figure from the past. The Jesus of Christian faith lives as God in a way that transcends the life of the saints in heaven.” – PHEME PERKINS.

Before Peter can begin any construction project on the mountain, another theophany takes place: “*Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’*” (9:7). The cloud descending on the mountain calls to mind the appearance of God at Mount Sinai: “*Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently*” (Exodus 19:18). As God spoke the words of the Torah on the mountain shrouded in clouds and smoke, the voice of God now speaks to the disciples on the mountain of Transfiguration, repeating the words spoken at Jesus’ baptism (“*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*” – 1:11) and adding a word of command: “*listen to him!*” Instead of focusing on memorializing this occasion for future generations, the disciples are charged with listening to Jesus as one who is “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14), the one who taught “*as one having authority, and not as the scribes*” (Mark 1:22), and the one who “*has the words of eternal life*” (John 6:68). The vision that they have experienced was not for the purpose of remembering this one occasion and memorializing it for future generations; it was a vision that was meant not as “*a mere visual spectacle but a picture that moves toward action*” (David Jacobsen). The purpose of the Transfiguration in the future lives and witness of the disciples becomes apparent when immediately after they hear the heavenly voice “*suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.*” (9:8). As mountaintop experiences are not meant to last forever but are always followed by a return to the everyday world to live out what one experienced on the mountain, Jesus leads his three disciples down the mountain. As they follow him, undoubtedly struggling to process and understand what they have experienced, Jesus “*ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead*” (9:9). Throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus often issues orders that his identity not be revealed. When the unclean spirit cries out “*I know who you are, the Holy One of God,*” Jesus rebuked the spirit and commanded the spirit to “*be silent and come out of him!*” (1:24-25). After cleansing a man with leprosy, Jesus commanded him to “*see that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the*

priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (1:44). After Peter confesses that “*you are the Messiah,*” Jesus responds by ordering his disciples “*not to tell anyone about him*” (8:30). The reason for this “messianic secret” is so that people do not confuse who Jesus is or jump to conclusions as to his identity; Jesus’ full glory will only be known when it is fulfilled through his death on the Cross and resurrection on Easter Day. For followers of Jesus in all generations, “*there is no way rightly to understand who Jesus is until one has seen him suffer, die, and rise again.*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.).

While the practice of placing markers to memorialize places where significant events in history took place so that we might better understand the story of how we became the people we are today, those who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord are not called to focus on building places of remembrance of events that happened during Jesus’ earthly ministry, for the Gospel message that Jesus is God’s beloved Son and the fulfillment of God’s promises of a Saviour for all humanity is not confined to one moment in history but is as timeless as God’s limitless love for all people in all times and places.

- “In the end Jesus, like everybody else, must be given the freedom to define *himself* – who he is, who he isn’t – quite independently of our ideas of him. In the end, the only way to *know* Jesus is to encounter him – just as is the case with everybody else. And that, Christians believe, really is possible, strange as it may seem to the strictly literal mind, because for them Jesus is not just confined to a moment in history two thousand years ago, and to the testimony of a few people who met him then, but he belongs to the present and future, too. His Spirit still lives, and still seeks us out – pursues us.” – Douglas John Hall.

It is good to know that “*history happened here*” in places that have shaped the stories of our lives and the places we called home. While Jesus did live at a specific time in human history, our focus is not on the places where his glory was revealed, but on the message that came down the mountain and was spread throughout the world: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; Jesus has the word of eternal life; Jesus calls us to follow him and to listen to him, for in his words are the life with his the light for all the world.”

Amen.