

Jesus is Transfigured
Mark 8: 27-9:8
Psalm 27:1-4

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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(Transfiguration Sunday)

Mark 8: 27-9:8

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.' And he said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.'

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Psalm 27:1-4

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.

One of the themes all through Mark's Gospel is the idea of who Jesus is. Jesus' disciples and the crowds seem to follow him at least partially just to find that out. The Pharisees keep asking him questions, trying to trip him up and / or find out who he thinks he is.

Jesus gets frustrated by people not understanding, and Mark keeps describing Jesus healing blind people. That this healing in particular keeps being specifically mentioned while others are all lumped together might be some kind of a hint.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus starts off by checking in with his disciples.

"Who do people say that I am?"

They list a bunch of prophets.

"All right, who do YOU say that I am?"

When Peter responds with the right answer, that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed one, Jesus says "Shhhh! Don't tell anyone."

Jesus starts telling his disciples that he will have to suffer, and be rejected by the rich and powerful and the authorities. He will be killed, and will rise from the dead after three days. Peter takes him aside to tell him that he's wrong, that's not how it works with God's Messiah.

Peter ... doesn't get it. Peter still thinks he's standing at the right hand of a human king like David was. Or Solomon. Or Caesar.

Peter thinks he's connecting into mortal power. He sees himself as the man at the king's right hand, the royal advisor, or vizier or something. He doesn't understand that mortal, worldly power is exactly what Jesus rejected in his Temptation in the wilderness. Peter is thinking about human things, even as Jesus is talking about divine things.

Peter needs to understand is that the Kingdom of God is very different from ordinary human kingdoms, the kind he's used to. The Kingdom of God is completely alien to people obsessed with power and violence, the usual route to becoming a king. It doesn't come into being from the top down by means of a conquering army. It springs up from the ground like a plant growing from a mustard seed, and taking over the field.

That's why Jesus does not even try to describe it simply and directly. He spends a lot of time using metaphors and telling stories, saying that "The Kingdom of God is like this...."

"Spoilers, Sweetie."¹

Jesus is not going to establish a kingdom like other kingdoms and conquer Judea. He is not going to throw Herod out of his palace or travel to Rome and kill Caesar. He is not going to accomplish his goals with armies and weapons. There will be a crowd of people on Palm Sunday who think he's going to, but they're not the first to misunderstand who Jesus is, and they won't be the last.

That's not why Jesus is here.

That's not who Jesus is.

Just like the Kingdom of God is different from human kingdoms, this king is different from human leaders. Jesus is a revolutionary, but not the kind that Peter is thinking of. He is not leading the kind of revolution that Peter is thinking of. The one that Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, or dagger-carrier, are ready to start.²

Jesus is not a mortal king like Herod. Or even like David, or Solomon. Or Caesar. Jesus is more than that. Jesus is the living Word of God.

¹ *Doctor Who* reference entirely intentional.

² The Zealots were Jewish nationalist revolutionaries. If they'd had the term, the Romans would have called them terrorists. Iscariot is not a family name – it literally means "dagger-carrier," and referred to a group of political assassins.

Jesus tells the crowd what kind of a kingdom he has.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In the Roman Empire, being a good Roman meant that you served your patron. Your patron was the richer and more powerful person to whom you owed your position and livelihood, and therefore your loyalty. In addition, you served the ultimate patron, Caesar. There was a government of men,³ not of laws, so you did literally whatever those men said, regardless of whether it was moral, or ethical. The patron bore all the responsibility before the law and before the Roman gods for what they told their clients to do.

In the Roman Empire, the worst criminals and the ones considered dangerous to Rome were crucified. The execution process was completely public, because part of the purpose was discouraging others. It started with the crossbar. The condemned person would be given the crossbar on which they were going to die, and they would have to carry it to the place of execution. You may remember seeing pictures of Jesus carrying the cross to Golgotha, the *via Delarosa*, that whole thing. That is what “take up their cross” means.

Jesus is saying that, in order to be good Christians, his followers have to be bad Romans. Their loyalty has to be to God first, not Caesar. The very first creed, basically the only thing that the whole early Church⁴ completely agreed upon, was that “Jesus is Lord.” That statement made them bad Romans.

Not all early Christians would be crucified. But some would. And all risked it.

³ I’m aware that this sounds like a sexist description: Roman society and government were sexist. There were not women in positions of official power.

⁴ i.e. the Church before the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).

But right now, before the Crucifixion and the Resurrection make some things abruptly clear, the disciples don't get it.

So, Jesus decides to show them that he is not just an ordinary man.

He takes Peter, James, and John up to the top of the mountain. There Jesus is transfigured. His appearance is changed. His clothes become dazzlingly white, whiter than any bleach could manage. This is a hint for the apostles and the reader that we're dealing with something beyond the ordinary human.

Moses and Elijah, the great lawgiver and the great prophet, are walking with Jesus, talking with him.⁵

Immediately Simon Peter, Jesus' only disciple born with both feet in his mouth, speaks up, offering to build some lodging for these important people. If all of this were about an earthly kingdom, that would be entirely appropriate.

But it's not.

And it's not.

Peter is trying to figure out what to say, and, while he's still speechless, a cloud overshadows them. The voice of God speaks out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

The disciples look around, and the voice from Heaven is quiet. Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus' clothes have gone back to normal, and the disciples are left with Jesus.

God has told them to listen to Jesus.

Really listen to Jesus.

Jesus' ministry in Galilee is done. He is headed toward Jerusalem now. We will spend all of Lent, the time between this coming Wednesday and Easter, listening to the things that

⁵ It is interesting that Jesus' disciples know immediately who these men are – does Heaven have nametags? Or do they just look exactly how the disciples pictured them?

Jesus teaches the disciples between this point and the Resurrection. The series is called *The Values of the Kingdom*.

But for now, know that the Kingdom of God is not like other kingdoms.

It is not about worldly power – Jesus rejected that. It cannot be won with weapons of war. Those who try to conquer the world with weapons of war in Jesus’ name are not doing a good job of following him.

It is not about a rulebook. Those who try to force others to live by a restrictive rulebook in Jesus’ name fail, and they all eventually have their hypocrisy shown to the world. You can’t force someone to be a Christian; you can only love them into it.

The Kingdom of God is about love. The Kingdom of God is about loving our neighbors and helping them, the ones who deserve our help and the ones who don’t. It’s about letting them see the power of God’s love in you, and getting them to want some of that.

The Kingdom of God requires that we reject any other claim to our ultimate allegiance. We only get one entry at the top of our priority list, folks.

The time may come where to be a good Christian you have to be a bad Roman, rejecting the claims to your loyalty from a boss or a job or a politician or even a family member, in favor of doing the right thing. The true thing. The kind thing. The loving thing.

There may be consequences to that. No, I don’t want to soft-pedal things here. There will be consequences to that.⁶ The more like the Roman system the environment around you is, the more likely you’ll have to make that kind of choice.

To that Jesus says, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

⁶ The most famous prophetic document ever written in the United States is not *The Letter from a Birmingham Country Club*. It is Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

Jesus doesn't say "Take up your cross and go off yonder."

Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." When Moses and Elijah had gone back to Heaven, Jesus was still there with the disciples. And he does not ask us to go anywhere where he isn't already there.

Truly I tell you, Jesus is still here with us, yea, even unto the end of the age.

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom should I be afraid?

Thanks be to God.

AMEN