

Becoming the People of God: Crossing Over
Mark 9:2-9 2 Kings 2:1-12
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St. Helens, Oregon on February 11, 2024
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Here we are at that point in the year when it is time for us to pivot from Epiphany to Lent. We have spent several weeks since Christmas “Becoming the People of God” - that is, the steps before us for us to walk as we seek to be faithful to Jesus. Now, as Lent approaches, it is time for us to get down and dirty with the important work that Christ calls us to do in the valley in between today’s mountain story and Jesus being raised on the cross on Good Friday. Transfiguration Sunday serves as that pivot to turn our gaze to the journey ahead.

Our Old Testament passage: Elijah the prophet is a marked man. His opposition to idolatry and injustice in the midst of spiritual and social confusion has placed him among a persecuted minority. Indeed, it seems to him that he is alone, everyone turned against him, in standing up for the name of the Lord. And so Elijah the fugitive seeks refuge in a cave. It’s there he spends the night.

And in the deep darkness of that place the Lord calls out to him, and speaks to him in sheer silence. God does more than make himself known to his beleaguered prophet. God does more than console his loyal servant. Elijah does not simply witness a manifestation. He is entrusted with a mission. He is to go and do something: designate new leadership who will restore authentic religion and true justice. He is to cross over by initiating a new and unexpected beginning. Then he will be caught up by chariot, sweet chariot and carried home.

In our NT passage, Jesus goes to a high mountain with his inner circle of disciples. He is transfigured. However, let us look at what happens immediately before and after today’s passage.

At the end of the previous chapter, chapter 8, Jesus tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and raised on the third day. Peter, you might recall, did not welcome such prophetic predictions. Peter grabbed Jesus’ arm and pulled him to the side to rebuke him and tell him that such atrocities must never happen. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter, telling him that he is being a stumbling block to him and that he should, instead, “get behind him”. Jesus goes on to turn this moment into a teaching one. He turns to the rest of the disciples and tells them that if they want to be his followers that they have to take up their cross and follow him and “lose their lives in order to save them.”

As for what happens immediately *after* today’s passage, Jesus heals a young boy possessed by a demon at the desperate request of the boy’s father.

All this is to point out that today’s passage is bookended by rather dramatic accounts of life or death situations. On the one end, we are talking about Jesus’ death and, at the other end, we are dealing with an intense scenario in which a young boy’s life hangs by a thread when a demon casts his body into both water and fire.

And, between these two ominous stories lies today's Transfiguration passage. These two realities meet each other this time of year, when we gather to say goodbye to the season of Epiphany and say hello to the season of Lent. We crossover.

Jesus knows that there is a time for talking and a time for walking. Which is why today Jesus invites us to stop talking and to start walking up a mountainside together. And here we are.

It's time for action, that's what Larry Walters thought. The year was 1982 in San Pedro, CA, when he took out his folding lawn chair. He tied weather balloons to it because he was going flying that day. He made sure to pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in case he got hungry. He brought along his BB gun so he could pop balloons and come back down. It wasn't long after takeoff from his back yard that he was spotted at 16,000 feet up by airline pilots flying in on final approach to the nearby airport. I'm sure their radio calls to traffic control went something this, "Tower, you won't believe what we see up here..."

Lent is a time of walking and doing. We have listened to the stories of Jesus. And that is all well and good. But if we do nothing but listen - if we do not allow the stories of the Bible to actually change the way we view the world and each other and treat the world and each other - then what's the point?! If we do nothing but come to worship each Sunday at 10:30 A.M. at Plymouth Presbyterian Church, 2615 Sykes Road but never let anything we learn here change us "out there," then I have some tough news, we are not Christians, but merely churchgoers.

Let me put it another way, if we were simply to stay up on the mountain with the Transfigured Jesus - if we were to help Peter find some camping stuff and "sit down and stay awhile" - that demon-possessed boy at the bottom of the valley would continue to be possessed by a demon while we sit comfortably, basking in the light of Jesus and Elijah and Moses.

But Jesus will have none of that. And so, we begin the hard work of Lent, starting this Wednesday, smearing ashes on our forehead and reminding ourselves that we are but fleshly mortals who have been called, graciously, to join Jesus Christ in the life changing work of the Gospel. With the Lent Study Series focused on the disciple Peter, we will learn from A Wandering Faith. (Tuesdays, February 20, 7:00 pm by Zoom. Study guides will be available on Ash Wednesday and beginning next Sunday for Lent.)

So friends, when there is so much work to do, do not be seduced by the mountain top experience. Let yourselves be transformed or even transfigured by it yet, but not seduced. Do not allow such mountain top experiences, whether they are "out there" or "in here" in this very room, to keep you from seeing the folks that need help in the valley.

Or, perhaps you, yourself, do not feel welcome on the mountain. Perhaps you feel that you've been perpetually stuck in the valley with the demon-possessed boy. Either way, Jesus leads us to both high mountains and lowly valleys where there is work to be done. Lent is a time of soul-searching, of Spirit encountering, when we, as both individuals and as a faith community, do the hard work of walking along with Jesus to where he leads us.

We are crossing over. Join me here in the sanctuary on Wednesday night as we begin Lent together.