

Listen... (Mk 9:2-8)

This passage that Marc read for us today describes an extraordinary moment in the story of Jesus and the inner circle of his disciples: Peter, James, and John. It's placed about midway in the book of Mark—when it actually occurred in real time is hard to say, but its' placement in the text identifies a shift in the focus of Jesus' ministry and his teaching with the disciples. It may seem odd for us to consider this text today because we've only been in the first chapter of Mark these past several weeks as we've studied the beginning of Christ's public ministry. Now, suddenly, we're jumping over quite a bit of material to get to this moment, but the lectionary assigns this passage for the Sunday prior to the beginning of Lent, which begins next Wednesday. It does this because the Lenten season leads us to the cross and ends with the joyous celebration of Easter. And, as we noted already, this event in Jesus' life marked a shift in his focus and teaching with his disciples, which, in fact, was pointing him and them to Jerusalem and what would take place there.

Up until then, from the perspective of the disciples, their time with Jesus was going fairly well. He enjoyed wide popularity as he went about displacing evil through the goodness of God evident in his teaching and actions of delivering people from sickness, demonic oppression, even death. There had been some touchy moments with the religious leaders who pushed back on some of what Jesus was doing and saying, but these hadn't, as yet, kept Jesus from the mission of announcing the arrival of God's kingdom and blessing people in anticipation of its fulfillment. As we know from previous study, their perception of the kingdom of God differed substantially from that of Jesus—they were trying to work it out, but it didn't quite fit into the paradigm they were working with, the only one available to them at the time. And while that might have been somewhat troubling for them, it didn't keep them from enjoying what they were experiencing as they journeyed with him.

In fairness to them, we have to remind ourselves that they were apprenticed to Jesus, picking up information as they listened to this public teaching, helped him in his ministry of blessing, and learned from him privately as they asked questions about his teaching. We also have to bear in mind that their understanding of Jesus was developing progressively—in somewhat the same way ours grows as well. They initially understood Jesus as a teacher whose insights and approach to God were fresh and remarkably different than what they had previously known. He was a rabbi, and they were his followers. As events unfolded before them, they—and the general public—came to understand him as a healer, a step up from rabbi leaning more in the direction of a prophet. In their faith history, prophets spoke on God's behalf and the power of God worked through them to effect healing and to perform miracles. So far so good. Just prior to the event of our text, Jesus had asked them: who do people say I am? They confirmed the consensus of prophet in public opinion. But then he pressed them further: But what about you? Who do you say I am? The record tells us that Peter, taking the initiative for the group answered, "You are the Messiah." So the disciples' understanding of him had moved from teacher to Messiah—strangely, then, Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about this. This seems counter-intuitive: wasn't that the point? But as we know, popular opinion about the role of the messiah differed from what Jesus understood, and he didn't want this to get in the way of what he was teaching and in the face of what would soon occur.

Now I know that we've covered this ground before—forgive me for rehearsing what is fairly common knowledge to most of us, but we had to set the stage for what follows. Because what follows represented a significant challenge to their—and perhaps for some of us, to our—understanding of Jesus. At that point in time, the messiah was held to be a powerful leader of people, a key figure in establishing God's kingdom which for them meant independence from Rome, and one who would cleanse the Temple making it once more the central feature of their worship and encounter with God. As important as all of this was, the person they anticipated as messiah, was still in their perception, a person, human in every respect, someone just like themselves only specially chosen to lead the way into the future they anticipated and desired, which was actually a return to what had been theirs in the past.

Jesus anticipated something different from this. And this he began to explain to them as the tone of his teaching shifted to what we might call perilous discipleship marked by self-denial, taking up their cross and following him. From a human perspective, the prospects for the future became grim. So much so that Peter took him aside and rebuked him, and was himself rebuked for having in mind mere human concerns rather than the concerns of God. Before we pile on Peter, let's understand that he was acting in what he thought to be the best interests of Jesus from his point of view not grasping that his point of view was limited in the greater context of God's actions and purpose. It was a mistake we're also prone to make.

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain where this extraordinary event occurs. As we heard, and the other gospel accounts of this record, Jesus' appearance changed—a dazzling brilliance seems to engulf him and pour from him, and two persons appear with him, Moses and Elijah, significant figures from their faith history and likely known on the basis of the conversation the disciples overheard. It's worth noting that in this account, and the others, Moses and Elijah appeared as ordinary persons—the brilliance emanates from Jesus alone. It's an awesome and bewildering moment for the disciples. This was unlike any of the other remarkable events they had witnessed in the company of Jesus—what could be the point of this moment? And why would they be included in it?

Some hints come from the presence of Moses and Elijah. Historically both of them had significant encounters with God on a mountaintop. In both cases, their experience confirmed the divine origin and source of their respective calls. Each were validated in their respective moments by the presence and direction of God personally. These encounters weren't supernatural gimmicks meant to dazzle, but the pointed intervention of a personal God guiding God's people through the plan God was pursuing to restore creation to its rightful place. In Israel's faith history, God's presence was indicated by a glory cloud—a thick, bright, luminescent feature that was seen. It happened on the mountaintop, on the Tabernacle that journeyed with them in the wilderness, and on the Temple when it was dedicated in Jerusalem. This meant that, unlike surrounding nations who could only guess at what their imagined deities desired, Israel's God was present and communicating the divine will in the course of their history. They didn't have to guess—their God informed, personally.

Given this history, it is reasonable to consider this event as one of these signature moments attesting to the divine origin and source for the messianic role of Jesus, but with one crucial difference. Moses and Elijah were, in their respective experiences, in the presence of glory that reflected upon them. In this moment, Jesus wasn't reflecting glory—he was its source, it was coming from within him. It was, as Tom Wright puts it, “God's space and human space coming together at last, of God's time and human time meeting and merging for a short, intense period, and of God's new creation and the present creation somehow knocking unexpected sparks off one another.” Building on Wright, this represents a moment when all of the ways God was present to humankind in disparate ways through history converged in the life of Jesus revealing not just that its ultimate fulfillment rests in Jesus, but that Jesus, as the pre-existent Word of God, was and is in all of it as its source.

Amid this mind-bending moment, Peter struggles to respond somehow to this, suggesting the building of shelters to commemorate the experience, when the cloud covers the disciples and the voice from the cloud repeats the pronouncement at Jesus' baptism, “This is my Son whom I love...” with an additional qualifier, “Listen to him.” Not merely an admonishment, but a direct reference to Deut. 18:15 where Moses spoke of the prophet, like himself, to come, saying, “You must listen to him.” And this is the crux of the matter, for them on that mountaintop, and for us as his followers today. All of eternity was present in that moment of transfiguration—what they had known of God in the past, what God was doing in their present, and the future that lay ahead of them, and us—converged in that moment, and was confirmed to us as we listen to him.

The takeaway for us is the lesson that Jesus and the story of his life is not just an accident of history where a good-hearted, kind man happened to be in the right place at an opportune time to establish a legacy of virtue inspiring our noble aspirations. This moment separates Jesus as unique in the span of time—in Jesus, God's very self is inserted into and

intersects with humanity's story, not to dazzle, but to direct, to lead us away from the destructive impulses of corrupted souls into the glorious freedom of wholeness, of harmony with God and one another, of sanctified imagination participating with the creativity of God to bring about the promise of a restored creation filled with people who brim with the energy and life of God's very Spirit.

And it doesn't depend on extraordinary experiences—though many on a lesser scale than this are sprinkled abroad. The outcomes God intends don't require spectacular spiritual events, because these in and of themselves don't prevent setbacks—Moses, Elijah, Peter all stumbled in the course of their faith journeys. The transfiguration didn't cancel the crucifixion. The outcomes God intends emerge as we listen to him, to Jesus, and take him at his word, that despite your current experience, or whatever appears grim for the foreseeable future, that's not the end of the story.

As we prepare to enter the season of Lent amid all the uncertainty of our present situation with COVID, political distress, social unrest, the deprivations we've had visited upon us—the outlook may appear grim. Allow your spirit to settle and find its center in the grip of God. Find ways to clear out the strident voices clamoring for attention in our time so that you can hear the voice of Christ speaking peace, strength, and confidence in the promise of restoration and renewal. Find that place of stillness, and listen. AMEN