



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, February 11, 2018

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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2 Kings 2:1-12 | Psalm 50:1-6 | 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 | Mark 9:2-9

THE TRANSFIGURATION: SPEECH AND SILENCE IN THE FACE OF MYSTERY

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.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

WE HAVE JUST HEARD THE FAMOUS AND GLORIOUS story about the Transfiguration of Jesus. My question is how we can make sense of it—a difficult matter for me at least, because the more I think about it the odder it becomes. To begin with, it seems to have two very different kinds of meaning.

I

One kind of meaning is that of a Divine epiphany: the epiphany of the Son, in his shining raiment, and of the Father too, in the voice from heaven. Here God is revealing himself as greater than nature. What happens here is completely beyond our experience of the world we know it.

When we are told that a voice came from heaven, saying "This is my Son, the Beloved," how are we to imagine this event? Have you ever heard something like that? To what can we compare it? What could the conversation between Moses and Elijah and Jesus possibly be like? We cannot even imagine them.

These are ultimate mysteries. It is hard to know what we could possibly say about them.

II

But at the same time there is another kind of meaning here which is much more intelligible. One of the points we can understand, at least at a superficial level, is that Jesus is an essential part of the sacred tradition of the Jewish people. He is the colleague of Moses, who founded the religion and of Elijah, who redeemed it. He is not a wacky upstart but one of the greatest of the prophets, one of the holy men of Israel. His very transfiguration is an act of God, and, as at his Baptism, he is said by the voice from heaven to be his "Son, the Beloved."

This kind of meaning is in a way reducible to a set of theological statements. It is especially important in the Gospel of Mark, for Mark has very few explicit theological statements about the nature of Jesus. There is no annunciation to Mary, no virgin birth, no shepherds and angels, no sermon from the mount, and no theological statement like John's wonderful beginning: "In the beginning was the Word." In fact there is no Resurrection, just an empty tomb.

Instead, Mark's Gospel starts with Jesus as an adult, already on the scene. He is baptized by John, then he goes through the world healing and preaching—for the most part being misunderstood, both by the people and by the disciples themselves. For Mark, Jesus is a mysterious presence, to be felt and seen and heard and responded to, but not explained. He is like a flame going through the world.

The Transfiguration offers the mystery, but it also offers theological statements about the nature of Jesus.

But in doing so it seems to combine two things that don't fit together: incomprehensible mystery and a comprehensible message.

III

I want to turn now to what may seem like a different problem, but will I think turn out to be the same one after all.

At the end Jesus urgently tells his disciples to keep the whole thing secret. Why does he want it kept secret? If this is an epiphany, a showing forth of God, why should it not be as public as possible? Why reveal and then hide? Let us explore this question.

One possibility is that secrecy is driven by strategic considerations: If Jesus were publicly said to be the Messiah, the argument would go, this would draw attention to him in a dangerous way, which would compromise both the nature and the extent of his mission. Better to keep it quiet.

But this does not make much sense to me. Jesus' behavior in going around Galilee preaching and healing, then going straight to Jerusalem where he challenges the religious authorities, seems inconsistent with any need for secrecy. He does sometimes want to avoid big crowds, but in fact he attracts them. In his speech and action he does not hide who he is, but insists upon it. It is only the label that he seems to refuse.

So I don't think the strategic explanation works well. I think we are facing something much more mysterious: a complex desire to reveal and to hide, to show and to cover, to speak and to be silent, all at the same time.

The revelation of Jesus in this passage seems in an odd way to require silence and secrecy at the same time. Both are needed. The two gestures are like two hands clapping.

How and why can this be?

IV.

Here is a thought. Suppose you were trying to explain to a friend your own experience of God in yourself, in other people, and in the world. Could you do it? In what words or images?

Not very well, I am pretty sure. Any attempt might reasonably be accompanied by qualifiers, such as “this is how it seems to me,” or “I really cannot just say what I am trying to say, but is as if . . . or it is like . . .” and out would come a comparison or image. Maybe you would end in silence.

Perhaps what Mark and Jesus are stressing here is how hard, how really impossible, it is to talk about God in any satisfactory way, and all the harder, the more intense our experience of him.

There is a side of us that wants to be able to describe and explain God, to reduce him to the comprehensible. But we cannot do that. He is a mystery infinitely beyond our powers of comprehension and speech alike.

Yet we want to do it, and try to do it, even when we know it cannot really be done. So we use images and metaphors; we acknowledge that we really cannot reduce God, or our experience of him, to words; we say and withdraw what we said, we speak and are silent.

A.

The whole Bible can in fact be seen to face the problem of talking about God, when we know he is beyond us. It is necessary, but in a sense it cannot be done. So the Scriptures find ways to do it, as well as they can, yet at the same time find ways to recognize its impossibility.

In the Old Testament, Yahweh reveals his name, but even to this day that name is never to be pronounced by observant Jews, who when his name appears in Scripture substitute another—Adonai, meaning “My Lord.” God repeatedly interferes with the regular course of nature—flooding the earth, parting the red sea, curing lepers, making Elijah’s water-soaked wood burst into flame, providing manna, even raising the dead, resurrecting the crucified Jesus—in ways that we cannot make sense of.

In our passage we have the Transfiguration itself, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the voice from heaven. They are true experiences for the disciples in the world and for us as we read, but we also find ourselves saying they cannot be “true” in the sense that they cannot be explained.

B.

Now suppose that the disciples did not keep the secret, but went to tell their friends, and the people in the crowd? How could they possibly do that? They would make no sense, really; they could not reproduce their experience in words; no one would believe them; and they themselves would feel their words turning to chalk in their mouths as they tried to express this, their deepest truth. They could deliver the theological message, that Jesus is the Son of God, accepted as such by Moses and Elijah. But they could not deliver the experience which gives that message its deepest meaning.

Maybe the reason for secrecy about deep religious experience is that we cannot possibly do justice to it. Some things have to be experienced, not heard about. So when Jesus says to the disciples, “Don’t tell anyone about it,” perhaps the reason is: “You can’t, you just can’t. So don’t try.”

Jesus is encouraging his disciples and us to honor by silence experiences we cannot understand or express, experiences we cannot reduce to reason and language. The fact that we are driven to silence does not mean they are not real. Quite the reverse.

Revelation and secrecy go together. We need to find a way to reflect both sides of this paradox. This is what Jesus is teaching us to do when he tells his friends to keep it a secret.

V.

Can we imitate Mark, and the disciples, and learn at the same time to say and not say, to reveal and to hide, to talk and be silent? How could we do this?

For examples from our own experience, we could start by looking at the practices of our church, where we do have ways of expressing our sense of God that do not claim to explain him; that do not attempt to reduce the infinite to concepts or theory or propositions of any kind, but instead offer moments and structures of nonverbal experience.

Think of our music; our sacraments; our robes; our traditions; our atmosphere of serious silence; our stained glass windows—and, not least, our own collective efforts to live out of the mysterious God who is among us and within us, from the generosity of breakfast program to the love that healthy parents and teachers give their infants and children.

We actually know how to live with the combination of speech and silence, the expressible and the inexpressible. Take the Eucharist: we have all kinds of things to say about what this means, both in our service and in our theology, ways of explaining it, and these are useful and good; but in the end we confront the sacrament of the unspeaking wine and bread. There is a truth there that cannot be fully stated in any words.

Likewise with Baptism: we have a beautiful ritual, and lovely words. But in the end it is unspeaking water that is poured on the baby’s head. Words alone would not do it. It is crucial that there be this element, and that it does not speak.

I think Jesus is teaching us in this passage, and in our life in the church, to live in silence as well as speech, in interior and well as exterior life, in mute secrecy as well as glorious revelation. We are to live in both dimensions at once.

The way to respond to a reading like the one we heard today is not to try to explain it at all, let alone explain it away, but to live out of it, as we might live out of heavenly music. In reading this passage, and in leading our lives, I think Jesus is asking us to honor both speech and silence, both words and nonverbal realities, asking us to be alive both to the words of our tradition and to the sheer presence of God and of each other.

AMEN.