

“Thy Kingdom Come”  
Epiphany: Transfiguration B  
Mark 9:2-9

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In Jesus' Name.

Prior to this Gospel reading Mark informs us that Jesus “began to teach the disciples that he 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 went on to say, “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.” The kingdom of God come with power is what some have the privilege to see before they taste death. It is what Elijah and Elisha saw. We heard about it in our first reading this morning. God’s transcendence interrupted the political soap opera of Israel and its kings. God bestowed on Elisha a double portion of God’s Spirit. He lived out of that gift. When the transcendent interlude was over he went back to business. He attended to the polluted water supply of Jericho. He saved a woman from foreclosure, thereby redeeming her two children from being sold into slavery to satisfy her creditors. And we thought mortgage companies today were unforgiving. He cured Naaman of his leprosy. All-in-all, he performed twice as many powerful acts as Elijah, confirming the double portion of Spirit from God. Read through the books of Kings and see if I’m right about that.

Jesus said “There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God has come with power.” It is a remarkable promise. In this case the some Jesus has in mind are Peter, James and John. Are we among the some Jesus has in mind? Epiphany, this season of the church year, is about making Christ known. On the mountain and to this inner circle of disciples that would now include us, we see Jesus in the glory of his resurrection. His physical body was translated to a spiritual body, one beyond sickness and sorrow and tears, and most certainly beyond death. He huddled with Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah were tied to the peoples’ hopes for something more, for something more to life than putting one foot in front of another and one day behind another. It is the same hope for transcendence we sing about in the hymn “Thine the Amen.” There is a reason we love that hymn, a reason that transcends reason. You can’t explain mystery. “Thine the glory in the night no more dying only light thine the mercy all from thee thine the glory yet to be.... [T]hen the ringing and the singing then the end of all the war....” Don’t try to diagram the sentences. There is no punctuation except periods at the end of each stanza. We couldn’t diagram these sentences any more than we could diagram God. We cannot diagram mystery.

The disciples heard and we overhear the voice from the cloud as it spoke to them. The same voice addressed Jesus in similar words at his baptism. The voice now spoke to the disciples about Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” God adds in a directive just for disciples, “Listen to him.” “He says he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. If you have any doubts about that, get over it. This is the program. Get with the program.”

It is not about staying on the mountain. The program is not about possessing transcendence. Jesus did not allow Peter to institutionalize the experience. Transcendent experiences are not at our beck and call. It was not in Elijah’s power to give any portion of the

Spirit that powered his life. It is God's to give. We long for transcendence, hunger for it. We become confused looking for it. We want to control it and have it on demand. It is so difficult to trust God and live out of what God gives. We want more. All addictions result from a taste of what approximates a transcendent experience, taking us out of the ordinary, giving us whatever rush. The result is a disengaged life as surely as the scenario Peter was proposing with his booths for Moses, Elijah and the transfigured Jesus. It is a life that finally implodes upon itself.

The true wonder is not that Jesus was transfigured into his resurrected glory. The true wonder is that he was transfigured back again. We praise Jesus for his great condescension. "He who was in the form of God," Paul writes, quoting a hymn, "did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on our flesh and our lot in life." Here he does it again in order to engage us at the point where it matters. The crux of it all is the grave.

Some refer to the Transfiguration as a foreshadowing of his resurrection. However, we cannot talk about the resurrection and shadow in the same sentence. The emphasis in these readings today is on light. We can just about see those chariots and horses of fire. The psalm is filled with glory and flame. Paul writes about the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Mark records, "He was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them." We don't meet up with anyone making such a fashion statement until the young man who was so dressed when he greeted the women in the empty tomb. We can hardly call this a foreshadowing. Forelighting maybe? The image I have with forelighting is that of a spotlight. The spotlight puts all the attention on the actors and makes everything as clear as day. The whole world and everything we need to know is right there in front of us for us to know and understand. Life is not like that. How about backlighting? Have you seen backlighting used in a stage play? The effect is much different from what a spotlight does. There is a transcendent quality about backlighting, drawing our attention beyond the actors. Especially as disciples go forward from this point, the stage upon which we live and act is backlit with the light of the resurrection. The resurrection backlights all Jesus says and does and all that the disciples encounter, all we encounter. So, when Luther wrote about "thy kingdom come," the second petition in the Lord's Prayer, he did not make reference to pyrotechnics. He did not in either the Small or Large Catechisms point to Elijah's fiery chariot or the four horsemen of the apocalypse in Revelation. He said rather, "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and live a godly life on earth now and in heaven forever." That is very earthy, almost mundane, as mundane as Jericho's water supply and a widow underwater on her mortgage.

The trajectory of most sermons and Bible studies on the Transfiguration goes from mountaintop spiritual experience back down to earth and to work. That is the direction sermons and Bible studies take because that is the direction. Elisha turned back to the political soap opera of Israel and its kings. Peter, James and John came down the mountain with Jesus and back to the slog of their three-year mission trip. Three days living out of a suitcase is all I can take. Two nights away from home at some conference and my bags are packed and I'm looking at my watch. I can't imagine the hardship of a three-year itinerancy.

They came down the mountain to people demanding more and never satisfied. They were hungry again. Always there were more sick people.

They returned to difficult relatives. Jesus had them too.

They had to worry about money. Judas kept the common purse and had light fingers. They stressed about having enough to feed the thirteen of them let alone all those who followed after them asking for help. And what about the families they left behind, did they have enough?

They came down the mountain to contentious and troublesome co-workers. I know of one workplace in which a new team member put up wallpaper on her computer screen which read, "It is difficult to soar with eagles when you work with turkeys." Her co-workers laughed until they got to thinking about it. "I guess we are the turkeys," someone finally said. So much for teamwork. The disciples consistently argued among themselves about who was the greatest, who should get the credit for organizing those 5000 people on the hillside that they could be fed so expeditiously, and who was at fault for forgetting to bring bread on the trip across the lake.

From Jesus point of view he has just experienced his resurrected glory, physical body translated into a spiritual body, and here he is back with these dim disciples. Jesus asked them a number of times, "Don't you understand yet?" In answer to the question they stared at one another or looked down at the ground. It was a rhetorical question met with silence. No, they didn't understand.

All of this mundane and tedious stuff is now backlit with resurrection light. That is good to remember as we begin our descent into Lent.