

## 2-11-18 Sermon “A Bird’s Eye View of the Gospel” – Mark 9:2-10

We’ve been in Mark’s Gospel for a couple weeks now. And I’m guessing that many of you are starting to get used to Mark’s manner of storytelling. That you’ve begun to acclimate to this gospel is fast-paced, and abrupt, that is light on conversation and heavy that action, that moves breathlessly from one event to another, punctuated again and again by that word: “immediately.”

If that’s the case, then this morning’s Gospel reading should probably come with the preface, “And now for something completely different.” It’s almost as if someone has pressed the pause button. Halfway through this action-packed, apocalyptic story of God’s Kingdom breaking into history, everything slows to a halt. The camera zooms all the way out, and just for a minute, we a glimpse of the whole picture at once. A bird’s eye view of the Gospel, we might call it.

Like the disciples, we see that from the top of the mountain, everything looks different. Jesus is transfigured, *transformed*, before our eyes, and for a moment we can see the big picture. The big picture of who Jesus is, and of who we – as disciples – are called to be.

I’m inclined to believe that Mark presses pause at the transfiguration because this moment constitutes a turning point in the Gospel. Right before our text for this morning, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And then, more importantly, “Who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter boldly answers, “You are the Messiah! The very Son of God!”

Ding ding ding! Peter has gotten it right! As he’s followed Jesus from town to town, Peter has heard Jesus preach about the Kingdom of God; he’s witnessed him healing the sick, touching lepers, casting out demons, and welcoming outsiders. And through this, Peter has recognized Jesus for who he is. He is the Messiah, the one called the Son of God. He is the Savior for whom the Jewish people have hoped and prayed; the one who has come to set God’s people free.

Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah; the disciples finally ‘get it.’ And so, Jesus comes to a turning point in his ministry. Many who study Mark’s Gospel call it the ‘turn toward Jerusalem.’ Up until this point, Jesus has been an itinerant preacher, wandering from town to town throughout the region of Galilee. But now that the disciples have recognized him for the Messiah he is, it’s time for Jesus to shift his focus, to ‘set his face toward Jerusalem’, to do what he came to do.

And what Jesus came to do, according to Mark, is to invade the very center of power, of the empire, with God’s subversive, world-changing love. In a world where evil is on the loose, Jesus has come to upset the status quo and turn things upside down. He has come to bring a new authority that makes the religious and political leaders of any age shake in their shoes.

Peter is right that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. But, Jesus adds, there’s a catch. As they descend the mountain, Jesus reminds his disciples that he is also the Son of Man.

Ok, think the disciples, we’ve heard of the Son of Man. He’s a character in Jewish apocalyptic literature – like the Book of Daniel. He is the one who will come in glory at the end of the age to triumphantly usher in God’s eternal Kingdom.

“Yes,” says Jesus. “Eventually. But there are a few things that need to happen first.” And then, Jesus begins to teach them “about how 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.”

We who read these words two thousand years later know how the story goes. We are familiar with this bird's eye view of the gospel. But for those first disciples who have left everything to follow this miraculous, powerful Jesus, this is disturbing, unsettling, *terrifying* news. Jesus tries three different times, in Mark's Gospel, to teach his disciples about his impending death and resurrection. But the disciples simply do not – cannot, *will* not – understand.

The disciples don't want to hear what Jesus says about suffering and dying. I get that. To be honest, some days I don't want to hear it either! Because the thing is, when we press that pause button, when we zoom out on the Gospel and recognize Jesus as the Messiah who is faithful to God and yet who suffers and dies...well? What exactly does that mean for who we are called to be as disciples?

The transfiguration is a turning point in the narrative of Jesus' ministry. But it is also a theological turning point in our understanding of Jesus' identity. It changes the focal point of the Gospel in a way that can be abrupt, unsettling, even frightening. The transfiguration shifts our gaze as disciples from the manger to the cross.

Until now we have been looking backward, marveling at the miracle of Incarnation. Reveling in the fact that God came into the world, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And then today, something shifts. The transfiguration changes our perspective so that we can no longer look back toward the manger, and we must begin to look forward toward the cross. The miracle of Incarnation is as real as it ever was. But from here on out, we begin to see that everything about Jesus, everything Jesus does, will lead him to the cross.

So...what does that mean for us? "If any want to become my followers," Jesus says, "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."

That's a hard pill to swallow, isn't it? To accept the fact that if we are following the path of Jesus Christ, then we can be sure that at some point along that path, we will come face to face with a cross.

When Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, he is not calling us to a passive, sentimental, feel-good love. We cannot confuse the path of discipleship – of Christ-like love – with some idea of 'being good,' or caring for the people we already love. That's a fine pace to start, but it as Christians, it cannot be where we stop.

Following Jesus means walking the Way of the Cross. It means living a life of resistance to the Powers of this world. It means opposing all forms of hatred, greed, violence, oppression, domination, and despair. It means defying the powers of empire and exploitation at every level that we encounter them – the personal, the religious, the political.

I can see why the disciples are terrified. If we commit to walking in the Way of Jesus – the Way of the Cross – we may find ourselves ridiculed, scorned, or rejected by friends and family. If we live as Jesus lived and teach what Jesus taught, we may be beaten or thrown in prison.

We don't talk about this much in church, but the truth is, if we live lives of radical Christian discipleship, if we resist the powers of hate, injustice, and evil wherever we see them, we, too, may lose our lives for the sake of the Gospel. From the early Christian martyrs to German anti-Nazi pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer to our own Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; from Archbishop Oscar Romero to 26-year-old humanitarian aid worker Kayla Mueller. If we live as

Jesus lived, friends, we may die as Jesus died. If we are walking in the way of Jesus, we will always encounter a cross.

And yet, there is one more thing that must be said.

It is true that there is no discipleship without a cross. But in Jesus Christ, God shows us that there is no cross without resurrection.

The Way of Jesus leads us to the cross, but it does not end there. The transfiguration, this bird's eye view of the Gospel, reveals this to us, if we have eyes to see it. Midway between the manger and the cross, we get a glimpse of resurrection.

The disciples don't understand it. *We* don't understand it, not really. But it is the unshakeable truth of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The God we worship, the God who is saving the world, the God who tears open the heavens and comes down to be with us in the Word made Flesh – this God has won the ultimate victory in Jesus Christ over every power of evil in the world. “Hang me on a cross,” says God. “Subject me to the power of Death itself. But my love is stronger than death, and still I rise.”

From a bird's eye view – from a *God's* eye view, the cross and the resurrection are inseparable. It is true for Jesus, and it is true for us. Every path of discipleship that leads to a cross holds with it the promise of resurrection.

Friends, on this Transfiguration Sunday, we have reached our own turning point. Narratively, we are turning, with Jesus, toward Jerusalem. Theologically, we are shifting our gaze from the manger to the cross. Liturgically, have dispensed with Epiphany and are preparing ourselves to journey through the Season of Lent. Preparing to be marked with the ashes of our own mortality. Preparing for those forty days and forty nights during which we fix our eyes on the cross and – with fear and trembling, one foot in front of the other –we walk in the Way of Jesus.

But friends, take heart. Because the cross on our path is not the end. We may not see it, from our vantage point, but let us trust what we have seen on the mountain. From a bird's eye view of the Gospel, God's truth is clear: Beyond the cross, there will always, *always* be Resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.