

Sermon, February 11, 2024
Mark 9:2-9

“Jesus, Moses, and Elijah”

So, Jesus leads three of his disciples to the top of a mountain. Those are Peter, James, and John, who happen to be the three most important of the disciples in the development of the early Church. It is also significant that they go to a mountaintop. In the ancient world various mountains were considered the dwelling place of gods. Think of Mt. Olympus in Greek mythology, which was the home of twelve different gods, and of Mt. Sinai in the Hebrew scriptures, where Moses encountered the angel of the Lord in the burning bush and received from Yahweh the Ten Commandments. In 1 Kings, Elijah meets God on top of Mt Horeb where there is a great wind, an earthquake, and fire, but God was not in any of those, but rather there was a sound of sheer silence, or a still, small voice in some translations, through which God spoke to him. These kind of dramatic encounters with God are called theophanies. This morning's reading, where Jesus appears in a dazzling light would be called a Christophany. It is a revelation of his divine nature.

There is particular symbolism in that it is Moses and Elijah who appear with Jesus and converse with him. Moses symbolizes the law, and Elijah symbolizes the prophets - two primary pillars of the Hebrew faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill”. So, the image of those three together symbolizes Jesus as that fulfillment.

The text tells us that Peter, James, and John are terrified, which I'm sure any of us would be in such a circumstance, and then they found themselves overshadowed by a cloud, from which a divine voice is heard. Clouds play an important role in the Bible. For example, when the Israelites are escaping from Egypt a great cloud appears between them and the Egyptian army in pursuit of them, and in the 24th chapter of Exodus, Moses goes up on the mountain, where a cloud covers the mountain for six days, and then the Lord speaks to him out of the cloud on the seventh day, and Moses then enters the cloud for forty days and nights, where he receives instructions from the Lord. The cloud is symbolic of the God who cannot be seen, but only heard.

In today's reading God's voice is heard out of a cloud by the three disciples, which says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”. It is similar to the voice from heaven on the occasion of Jesus' baptism which says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!”

In preparation for this sermon, I searched through several commentaries, which offered reflections on various aspects of this passage, but gave little attention to the last three words spoken by the voice coming from the cloud, i.e., “listen to him”. Personally, I believe that those three words are, perhaps, the most important words in the whole story. The dazzling appearance of Jesus in glory, as well as the voice of God speaking of Jesus as His Son, again, reveals the divine nature of Jesus as the Christ sent into the world - but who was sent into the world clothed in the authority to speak on behalf of God. Because when Jesus speaks, we have to assume that his words are compatible with the will of God. I say this because over the years I have known too many who proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior, yet don't seem to have much interest in what he had to say.

When we read a little further on in this chapter of Mark, we see that when Jesus and the disciples came down off the mountain they are confronted by a crowd and a father who has a son who “has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid...”. Jesus then casts out the unclean spirit that plagues the boy. There is a particular painting of the Transfiguration by the Renaissance painter, Raphael, that quite correctly recognizes the connection between the two stories. The top half of the painting shows Jesus transfigured before the three disciples, and the lower half depicts the crowd at the bottom of the mountain, with some of the figures pointing upwards towards Jesus in glory, while others point at the boy possessed by the unclean spirit. These gestures tie the two events together. The top half shows Jesus in divine glory, while the lower part speaks of the humanity of Jesus, and to my way of thinking, reveals his true glory, which is the love that he has for us mere mortals, and especially for those who suffer and need the power of divine healing in body, mind, and spirit.

So, when we choose to “listen to him” we learn that we, the Body of Christ in the world, are called to reveal the glory of his love through our own words and acts of care, compassion, and love. Amen.

Let us Pray: O God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, age after age the living wait upon you and find that of your faithfulness there is no end and that your care is unfailing.

We praise you that the mystery of our life is a mystery of infinite goodness. We praise you for the order and constancy of nature; for the beauty and bounty of the earth, and for the varied gifts of loveliness and use which every season brings. Above all, we thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus who leads us in the ways of faith, hope, and love. Amen.