

AFTERGLOW

Transfiguration of Our Lord – Cycle B 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Every once in a while, the grace of God walks right up and smacks us squarely on the lips. A bit dazzled, we try to regain our composure by asking ourselves what just happened. The answers don't come easily, and the dumb look on our face refuses to fade.

It is always good news that does this to us – a clean bill of health, falling in love, the birth of a child or grandchild, a promotion, a windfall, graduating after years of study, winning at sports or having our team win, a visit from a long-lost friend, reconciling after a period of estrangement with someone whose friendship we have cherished. The list goes on: we could spend the rest of the day sharing our grace stories with one another. Our first reaction, interestingly, is disbelief. “Pinch me,” we might say to ourselves, “this isn't happening. This isn't my life; it's someone else's.” But as the good news sinks in, as the new reality becomes *our* new reality, we feel a bit lighter, the world seems a bit friendlier, and our sense of the future brightens. And for quite a while, we experience true joy and complete happiness.

Today's Gospel suggests this quality of grace. We may not know quite what to make of the vision the disciples had on the high mountain, but we understand the value of what they experienced. In fact, our term “mountaintop experience” proceeds in part from stories like this one when, for that moment of being on top of the world, so to speak, we have a God's-eye-view of life, and all we see and all we know is beauty and wonder.

Mark's need to nail things down notwithstanding – he tells us Jesus' transfiguration happened six days after he completed a significant teaching mission in Caesarea-Philippi – Jesus' transfiguration is really not that rooted in time and place. Rather, it is the stuff of faith; and it happens in the here-and-now whenever it dawns on us that the man Jesus, the one we meet only in the Bible, in someone's personal testimony, or in the proclamation of the church, is truly God's Son, the Beloved, as Jesus is described in Mark's gospel.

Saint Paul talks about Jesus' transfiguration in a different way. He says that as long as we place ourselves at the centre of the world, our world, the light of the gospel is veiled for us; we are blinded by the god that is this world, he observes. But something can happen, he discovered. We change and are changed – usually by our questions. And when we share our questions, we open the door a crack for faith; and with faith, perhaps belief in something other than life as existence defined by our birth and finally our death. Faith often sneaks in when we least expect it; when we think or feel we are at our most closed-down. And for people with a taste for discovery and adventure, God does not disappoint. An ordinary human being from an obscure time and place in the sweep of world history quietly stepped forward about two thousand years ago and began telling the truth about who we are, about who God is, and about who we are because of God. We listen, not because this person is physically attractive or hangs with the right people; we listen because he speaks words of life into our ears. He celebrates our unbounded capacity to love and care for one another and observes our dismal failure to do so. He gives us a paradigm for justice that looks like this present world turned upside down, and we cover our eyes from the spectacle because it's too radical. But his teaching and our seeming intransigence work on one another in the way that yeast and the sugar in grape juice work on one another to produce a fine wine. And that vintage moment, that kiss of grace that smacks us squarely on the lips and knocks us off our feet, occurs whenever we understand the word “gospel” down to our bones; whenever we realize that everything Jesus of Nazareth taught and everything Jesus of Nazareth did was a lifelong plea for life in the midst of death, justice in the midst of this world's powers taking matters into their own hands, wealth in the midst of poverty, love in the midst of hate, health in the midst of sickness, and peace in place of violence. What a guy! What a God who would plant such a radical message within and among the hearts and minds of people that we might transcend what we know only too well as our human nature. We love our comforts. We love the *status quo*. We love the darkness the gospel keeps disturbing.

Interestingly, as much as I love the image of grace walking right up and smacking me squarely on the lips, I'm not sure it happens that way. My guess is that it happens much as it happened for Peter, James, and John in that place apart. It was quiet. It was unusually peaceful and bright: a time-stands-still kind of day that W. O. Mitchell was so practised at describing in his stories. Jesus' transfiguration could have

lasted a nanosecond or several hours. We don't know and it doesn't matter. It was who the disciples saw Jesus to be that was important. For them the revelation came when they had a vision of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah; for us the revelation can come when we recognize the glory of God focussed with laser-intensity in the record of this one extraordinary teacher who speaks words of life, not only to bring wholeness to our individual lives, but to bring salvation to our lost and broken world. If there is hope for world peace, it is because of the gospel. If there is a chance for saving the earth from global disaster, it is because of the gospel. If there is a possibility for an end to oppression and inequity and the great injustices we visit upon one another in the name of entitlement or survival or nationalism or ideology or plain ordinary greed, it is because of the gospel and because of people unashamedly recognizing its integrity and its excellence and the deep claim it has on them.

I can never help smiling in Mark's gospel when something wonderful happens to Jesus, and the disciples are finally ready to make that great leap of faith that identifies him as the Son of God, and the first words out of Jesus' mouth are, "Don't tell anyone." It's called the Messianic secret, and it's one of the distinguishing features of the Gospel of Mark along with how clueless the disciples are. (I'll leave that for another sermon, though). Anyway, it occurred to me that Jesus or Mark might have overlooked the obvious in trying to quarantine the disciples' experience; that people would know something had happened to Peter, James, and John because they, too, were transfigured just a tiny bit by their mountaintop experience; that they had an afterglow because everything had changed for them – not unlike how everything changes for us when grace walks right into our lives and smacks us squarely on the lips. We certainly glow when a new baby is born into our family or something equally wonderful happens to us.

May I suggest that the Messianic secret was a good literary device for increasing the gathering force of the rising action in Mark's story, but a bad evangelism strategy; that enjoying the afterglow of communion with God in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is something Christian disciples need and something others need to see if our discipleship in the world is to be effective. "In this world is darkness, so we must shine" with our deep understanding of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and what God can continue to do through Jesus' disciples; you and me and a whole church-full of people worldwide, aglow with the gospel.