

“Fear Transformed Into Faith”

*A Sermon from Mark 9:2-8
Preached on 26 February 2006
Lakewood United Methodist Church
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Today, our focus is on the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. This occurs shortly before he heads toward Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, beaten and crucified. The Transfiguration story always falls within the season of Epiphany.

Epiphany comes right after Christmas and lasts until we enter the season of Lent. Epiphany represents to us a series of “manifestations” where we better recognize the identity, power, authority and significance of Jesus Christ.

Often during Epiphany we consider again the baptism of Jesus at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptizer. They were in the area of the Jordan River, and when Jesus was baptized, a voice was heard from heaven saying, “You are my beloved Son.”

That voice identifies the true significance of Jesus for us today. That is true for us in reading the story, but it is also true for those who witnessed the baptism. Jesus’ identity was “manifested” in those events.

Another manifestation of Jesus’ authority comes from John’s gospel, when Jesus and his mother, Mary, travel to Cana in Galilee. The occasion was a wedding. We don’t know who it was that married that day, but the host of the party was about to be embarrassed. The festivities had begun and the people were drinking wine, and the wine was running out. (Remember that they drank wine in part because the water was unfit to drink.)

Mary called those circumstances to Jesus’ attention, and soon Jesus acted in a marvelous way. Six stone water jars were nearby. They held anywhere from 20 to 30 gallons each. Jesus gave instructions for the jars to be filled with water. That was no small undertaking, but soon they were full.

Jesus gave further instructions to the servants to take some of the water to the chief steward. When the steward tasted it, it had become very fine wine. This story manifests to us the power of Jesus. Where the other gospels would have called this a “miracle,” John calls it a “sign.” It was a “sign” of Jesus Christ’s divine nature.

These are two of the manifestations concerning Jesus. There are more, as you would expect. The one miracle that is found in all four gospels is the story of Jesus feeding the multitude. Jesus took only a small number of loaves of bread and a few fish, and blessed it. He then instructed that it be handed out to the hungry people.

As many as 5,000 men were fed that day. The number doesn’t even include the number of women and children present. So this was one of the manifestations of Jesus’ power.

I will mention only one more manifestation. That one has to do with the fact that Jesus walked on water.

Following the feeding of the multitude, Jesus and his disciples were exhausted. They were near the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He sent his disciples in a boat across the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus stayed behind.

The sea was rough on that occasion, and a strong wind was blowing. The disciples were having a hard time getting to their destination. While they were still out on the water, they saw Jesus coming near the boat. He was walking on the water. You can imagine they were terrified,

just as you and I would have been in that circumstance. Again in this story, we are able to get a glimpse of the divine nature in Jesus Christ.

This last event in the life and ministry of Jesus left the disciples terrified. They were overcome with fear. Our sermon title today is “Fear Transformed into Faith;” our lesson comes from Mark, chapter 9.

Mark’s gospel, more than the other three gospels, portrays the disciples as having difficulty understanding Jesus. They had difficulty understanding his words, his identity (as the Son of God), his power and his authority. Time and again they witnessed and heard marvelous things, and time and again they didn’t get it. They didn’t catch on. They didn’t see the light. They didn’t understand.

Jesus took those disciples that were closest to him up the mountain, where the Transfiguration was to occur. He took Peter, James and John.

At Oklahoma City University, I had a marvelous professor who taught New Testament Greek. Earlier in life, he had spent many years in India along with the well-known missionary, Dr. E. Stanley Jones. My professor was named Theron McGee. Dr. McGee had important things to say about the apostle Peter.

Dr. McGee said Peter had a disease. Dr. McGee called that disease “foot in mouth” disease. Whenever we read about Peter, we find that he was quick to speak. Sometimes he spoke before he gave any thought to what he needed to say. In a few moments, we will see that Peter spoke while they were on the Mount of Transfiguration.

There is an interesting scene in the old movie, “The Man with Two Brains.” Steve Martin plays a brain surgeon who falls in love with an evil and conniving woman. Standing before the portrait of his late wife, Steve Martin asks for guidance. He asks, “Just show me a sign. Should I marry her or not? Please show me a sign.”

Suddenly, a cold wind begins to blow, sending an icy chill through the room. A voice is heard to say, “Nooo, nooo, don’t do it...” The wall splits in two, and the picture of his late wife spins on the wall faster and faster, while still saying “Nooo!” Furniture is crashing around the room. Suddenly, everything is still and Steve Martin picks himself up and says, “Since you won’t show me a sign, I guess it’s okay to marry her.” And he goes his merry way!

We might say that Martin had no intention of listening to his late wife. Another way of saying that is, he had “selective listening.” Some of us may have that same problem.

A 91-year-old fellow went to see the doctor for a checkup. Two days later, the doctor saw his patient again, smiling, standing next to a 30-year-old woman at his side.

“Thanks, Doc,” the old man said. “I did what you said.”

The doctor asked, “For heaven’s sake, what did I say?”

The 91-year-old man replied, “You said, ‘Find a hot mama and be cheerful.’”

“No,” said the doctor, “I said ‘You have a heart murmur and be careful.’”

Listening is one of the great challenges in human relationships. I have held onto a quotation for years. That quotation is, “I know you believe you understood what I said. But what you heard is not what I meant.” What that means is communication is not speaking. Communication is speaking, listening and understanding.

The disciples of Jesus were slow to understand and believe. That is particularly true in Mark’s gospel. That fact likely had bearing upon the fact that Jesus took only Peter, James and John up the mountain.

Jesus, Peter, James and John went to the mountaintop. Many mountaintop experiences are very special. The scenery can be particularly beautiful. The air can be fresh, and often

temperatures can be a good bit cooler. And Jesus and his disciples had traveled a good bit, and it was time for refreshment and rest.

We remember that Moses climbed the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. Later, his face was glowing because he had been in the presence of God. Often we think of God as being associated with a great and powerful light.

Whenever we read of “near death experiences,” we read about people who see a bright light. That bright light is associated with the presence of God.

Something like this is associated with the Transfiguration story. God was there with them and they would soon hear his words. That experience caused the apostles to be fearful. That experience would have likely made us fearful, also.

Knut Rockne, the football coach at Notre Dame, knew the power of fear. Today, we call it “Psyching out your opponents.” Notre Dame was facing a critical football game against a vastly superior University of Southern California team.

Rockne recruited every heavy weight student that he could find at Notre Dame and suited up about 100 incredible hunks in school uniforms.

On the day of the game, the USC team ran out on the field first and awaited the visiting Fighting Irish. Then, out of the dressing room came an army of green giants who kept on coming and coming. The USC team, upon seeing the Notre Dame team, panicked.

The USC coach reminded his players that Rockne could only play eleven men at a time, but the damage was done. USC lost. They did not lose to the 100 men in uniform; they were beaten by their own fear.

On the mountaintop, the three disciples came to understand that they were not only with Jesus; they were also in the company of Elijah and Moses. Peter, with his “foot in mouth” disease, spoke up and said, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

At that time, Jewish religion revolved around the Law and the Prophets; the disciples were about to have a religious revival right there on the mountaintop. They were terrified to be in the presence of these Old Testament figures.

And a cloud, symbolizing the very presence of God, overshadowed them. And from the cloud, they heard God say, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

When that happened, they must have blinked, only to realize that Moses and Elijah were no longer there. Now they saw only Jesus.

Clearly in that circumstance, Jesus was viewed as being more important than Moses and Elijah. For the disciples, their faith was no longer rooted in the Law and the Prophets. From this point forward, Jesus was at the heart of their faith. Their fear had been transformed into faith.

When they were climbing down the mountain, Jesus told his three disciples not to tell anyone of their experience until after the resurrection.

The Mount of Transfiguration was a frightening experience for Peter, James and John. But it was more than just a frightening experience. While there, the disciples experienced fear transformed into faith.

Thanks be unto God. Amen.