

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Mark 9:2-10

February 11, 2018

Transfiguration of the Lord

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A LIGHT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TUNNEL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Wednesday night, April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was scheduled to speak at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. However, when Dr. King arrived in Memphis, he wasn't feeling well due to a sore throat and fever. He asked his fellow worker, Dr. Ralph Abernathy, to take his place. When Dr. Abernathy stood up to speak, he could sense the large crowd was disappointed that Dr. King wasn't there. He called Dr. King at the motel and convinced him to come to the church and speak. When Dr. King arrived, he received a standing ovation.

Dr. King spoke extemporaneously that night, mostly about the Memphis Sanitation Strike. He called to mind the difficulties of the Civil Rights movement earlier in the 1960's. He remembered his near-fatal stabbing in 1958, when his doctors told him he would have died if he had sneezed. Dr. King ended his sermon with what turned out to be prophetic words: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter now, because I've been to the mountain-top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

People who were there that night, including Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young, said Dr. King had tears in his eyes when he returned to his seat. Shortly after 6:00 p.m. the next day, Thursday, April 4, 1968, Dr. King was shot and mortally wounded as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m.¹

As was his practice when preaching, Dr. King used many images from the Bible in his April 3 sermon. When he talked about going up to the mountain and looking over to see the Promised Land, he recalled the experience Moses had right before he died:

"Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain — that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees — as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I

have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’ Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command.” (Deuteronomy 34:1-5)

Dr. King’s talk about going up to the mountain and seeing the glory of the coming of the Lord also makes you think about Jesus up on the mountain with Peter, James, John, Moses, and Elijah. As they came back down the mountain, Jesus commanded his three disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen and heard until he was raised from the dead. Think about it — who would have believed them, anyway? But maybe as they talked with each other in the days and weeks to follow, especially when things started getting more and more difficult for Jesus and the disciples, they might have said something like, “I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. . . Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

At the end of today’s worship, we will sing: “Lord, the light of your love is shining, in the midst of the darkness, shining; Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us; set us free by the truth you now bring us. Shine on me; shine on me. Shine, Jesus, shine; fill this land with the Father’s glory. Blaze, Spirit, blaze; set our hearts on fire. Flow, river, flow; flood the nations with grace and mercy. Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.”²

And, oh, how Jesus did shine up there on the mountaintop that day! Mark describes it this way: “And he was transformed before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as not one on earth could bleach them.” (Mark 9:2-3) Matthew tells us, “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Matthew 17:2) Luke agrees with Matthew, “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Luke 9:29). Peter, James, and John probably could have used some of those special Eclipse glasses many of us wore back on August 21 when we looked at the total eclipse of the sun. Like us, Peter, James, and John couldn’t resist looking at the S-O-N in all of his glory and all of his brilliance.

This strange and mystifying story about Jesus being transformed comes at a crucial point in Mark’s gospel. Do you remember how the story began? “**Six days later**, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.” Six days later than what? What happened the week before? Well, that’s when Jesus asked his disciples as they were walking along, “Who do people say that I am?” They told him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asked **the** question: “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” (Mark 8:27-30)

This story is literally right in the middle of Mark’s gospel (at the end of chapter 8 in a 16 chapter gospel). Peter’s confession and Jesus’ teaching about his upcoming suffering and death change the direction and focus of the rest of the story. From that point on in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is intent on getting to Jerusalem; and his suffering and death become the focus of the final eight chapters of Mark’s story. It’s as if Jesus de-

velops tunnel vision. And, at the beginning of that tunnel, Jesus stands up on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John and he is transformed, “glory into glory.”

We talk about “the light at the end of the tunnel.” What we mean by that is hope of success, happiness, or help after a long period of difficulty. We might say, “I can’t even see a light at the end of the tunnel,” when life circumstances are particularly hard. Or someone tries to comfort us by saying, “There’s always a light at the end of the tunnel.” When we finally start making our way out of the tunnel of whatever is weighing us down, we are relieved to say, “I think I can see a light at the end of the tunnel.” We hope that the difficult situation we’ve been going through might be coming to an end.

We don’t often talk about “a light at the beginning of the tunnel.” Yet that is what this mysterious story of the transfiguration on the mountain is showing us. One of the quirky things about Mark’s gospel is that the story seems to end in this very strange way: “So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) If that’s the original ending of Mark’s story (and many people think it is), Jesus never shows up, shining in all of his resurrection glory. That makes some people think maybe Mark is giving his readers a glimpse of Jesus’ resurrection glory back at the beginning of chapter 9, up on the mountain, when his clothes became dazzling white. After all, Jesus ordered Peter, James, and John “to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Then Mark adds this tidbit: “So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.” (Mark 9:10)

As we begin our Lenten journey in four days, on Ash Wednesday, suppose we hear Mark’s story about Jesus’ transfiguration as “a light at the beginning of the tunnel.” The forty days of Lent are an opportunity to reflect on Jesus’ life and ministry, especially as he made his way to Jerusalem where he suffered and died on our behalf. The forty days remind us of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil before he began his public ministry. We will hear that story in worship next Sunday on the first Sunday in Lent. “Lent is a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for the coming of Easter. It is a time of self-examination and reflection.”³

Easter Sunday, April 1, is the light at the end of the Lenten tunnel. But, as the calendar and the life of Jesus and our own life experiences make clear, we have to go through the forty day tunnel of Lent before we break out into the light of Easter sunrise. That’s why it’s good to have a light at the beginning of the tunnel of Lent. As we hear the stories from the gospel of Matthew during Lent, the shadows will grow deeper and deeper as Jesus meets more and more opposition to his ministry and message of God’s grace and love. At our Good Friday service on March 30, when the lights are dimmed and the service comes to a close, it might seem as if the Light of the world has been extinguished for good. But, as we go through Lent this year, not only can we look ahead to the light at the end of the tunnel on Easter Sunday, we can also look back at the light at the beginning of the tunnel, up on the mountaintop, when we caught a glimpse of Jesus in all of his glory.

It's important to remember that Peter, James, and John didn't get to stay up on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Instead, they had to go back down the mountain, right back into the midst of messy life. The very next story in Mark is about people arguing with the rest of the disciples and a boy who needs to be healed. As Dr. King said in his sermon on April 3, Jesus and the disciples had some difficult days ahead.

And so do we, because life is difficult. As we get ready to enter into the Lenten season, I'd like to invite you right now to take a couple of minutes in silence to think about what is dark and fearful in your life. What tunnel do you find yourself in? Where do you need the light of Christ's glory shining in your life today and in the weeks to come?

[Give people a couple of minutes to think and pray.]

Remember, in the midst of the darkness, Jesus is already there, shining in all of his glory. When the tunnel gets the darkest, remember "mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Let us pray: Lord, the light of your love is shining, in the midst of the darkness, shining; Jesus, Light of the World, shine upon us; set us free by the truth you now bring us. Shine on me; shine on me. Shine, Jesus, shine; fill this land with the Father's glory. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information taken from "3 April 1968, I've Been to the Mountaintop, Memphis, TN," at www.kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu.

²Hymn #192, "Lord, the Light of Your Love Is Shining (Shine, Jesus, Shine)," in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

³What is Lent and why does it last forty days? at www.umc.org