

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 15, 2015
Transfiguration Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 34:28-35
Psalm 99
I Peter 1:13-21
Mark 9:2-10

The scene that Mark records in our Gospel lesson this morning presents me with a conundrum. As a preacher, I seek to help people take life and its varied experiences and to assign meaning to those experiences.

Human beings are “meaning makers.” We are driven to find meaning in our life experience because it provides us some sort of stability. When we cannot find meaning in our experience, the world becomes a hostile and even uninhabitable place. Part of my function as a preacher (or so I thought) is to help folks like you assign meaning to the events and circumstances of your lives. Often, the way we seek to do that is to place those circumstances into a larger, meaningful plan. And from a Christian frame of reference, the source of that larger plan is the narrative of Holy Scripture.

All well and good, until we arrive at a scene such as Mark describes this morning. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain, where Mark says that he is changed. He is *transfigured* before their eyes. In addition to the fact that they are all terrified, Mark cannot even find words to describe what is happening. He has no vocabulary with which to frame this experience. He reports: “Jesus’

appearance changed, and his clothing became dazzling white.” Then he adds, “Far whiter than any earthly process could make it.”

It’s as if Mark is saying, “No, you don’t understand – I’m talking whiter than white, more dazzling than dazzling, like nothing you have *ever* seen before.” And as if that isn’t enough, they are joined by two “blasts from the past,” Moses and Elijah. So, standing there on the mountain is Jesus, and with him the embodiment of the Law and the Prophets, the essence of Israel’s history.

Therein lies my conundrum as a preacher, and a challenge for you as “meaning makers.” *For what are we supposed to do with a moment like this?* It defies easy interpretation. It “rocks the world” of those who witness it. If Mark doesn’t have the language tools to describe and understand it, what makes us think that we do?

But, we are “meaning makers,” seeking to place the events of our lives into some larger, meaningful plan. Peter was a “meaning maker” also. And although he has just experienced something beyond his capacity to understand or describe, he feels like he needs to give it a shot. So, he says: “Teacher, this is wonderful! We will make three shrines, one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah!”

The word “shrine” here is the word “booth” or “tabernacle.” The Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles) was one of the three major feasts in the Old Testament, where the children of Israel were required to travel to Jerusalem to worship and to

offer sacrifices in the Temple. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated not only the harvest, but also remembered the forty years of wandering in the desert as the Israelites left Egypt. During that time, the children of Israel lived in tents and worshiped in the Tabernacle (also a tent).

Celebrating the Feast of Booths years later involved building tents made of plaited branches and thatched roofs, where the people would live for seven days as a reminder of their days when they lived in tents in the wilderness.

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah, anticipating the time when the Messiah would come, speaks of all nations traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16-17).

Just as you and I have our “perceptual grids” by which we try to assign meaning to the events of our lives, so did Peter. I think Peter may have had Zechariah and others in mind as he tries to assign meaning to this experience that defies explanation. He has taken this momentous encounter with God and tried to fit it into his pre-existing narrative, so that he can make sense of it all.

But then a voice out of a cloud stops him. The voice says: “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” Then Moses and Elijah are gone, and it is only Jesus before them.

Peter seems to want to fit all of this into a larger plan. But in trying to do so, he comes perilously close to missing an encounter with God. Peter is into

“meaning making.” God invites him instead to simply experience the mystery, to linger in the wonder and presence of Jesus.

I suspect that Peter is not alone. Most of us, I suspect, desperately want an encounter with God. We want assurance that we are not alone, that there is *more than we can see and touch and understand*. And yet, in those rare moments when God draws powerfully near to us, we find ourselves afraid. We feel like things are suddenly out of control. So what do we do? We try to *tame down* our experience of the mystery by fitting it into a plan.

It’s not hard to see why we do this. As much as we want an encounter with God, at the same time we *fear* the presence of God because we fear being changed and transformed. Look at Peter, James, and John on this mountain! They are tongue tied and scared out of their gourds! They are caught flat-footed. The hair on the back of their necks is standing up. They are in danger of wetting their pants. Their well-ordered lives have just been turned upside down.

Are you sure you want an experience like that?

God may not come to you in the same way that he did to these men on this mountain. But He *will* come to you. Most likely He will come to you in the ordinary things, in both the *small* victories and the *great* tragedies of your life.

When that happens, may I give you a tiny piece of advice? When God comes and unsettles the orderly life you’ve constructed, your first impulse may be

to try to force those disruptive experiences into line by cramming them into a larger plan.

But there is a second option. Sometimes, it might be well and good just to relax and enjoy the wonder and the mystery of the experience. Don't force it to fit anywhere. Let the encounter be what it is. There will always be time for reflection. Don't let your impulse to be a "meaning maker" shield you from the glory that is all around you. *Leave room for the mystery.*

As a preacher, I shall continue to try to help you to fit the events and circumstances of your lives into some kind of meaningful framework. But that happens primarily as we open the Scriptures each week and I attempt to preach them.

But the centrality of the Lord's Table in this space reminds us that ultimately the mystery of God's presence with us takes precedence over the meaning I try to assign to it. The symbols and colors that surround us, and the ritual actions of the liturgy, remind us that every time we gather in this place we are, in some sense, on that holy mountain where "there are no words."

So come with faith today. Open your heart to Jesus as he stands before us in these symbols of bread and wine. Let the grace that comes through them change you. For the journey with Jesus to Jerusalem now awaits us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.