

## Transfiguration B (2/11/2018)

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

**Mark 9:2-9**

*We're often at a loss for words at critical moments. But, rather than speak for the sake of speaking – rather than rush immediately to our own responses – God invites us to watch, to wait, and to listen for the voice of truth. Attentive silence can be transfigurative, allowing us to see things in a new light and hear what we really need to hear.*

“He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

I noticed something new this time through the story of the transfiguration in the Gospel of Mark. Until now, I hadn't noticed that the radiant epiphany on the mountaintop produces fear in the three disciples who are invited along. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; Jesus' followers are beset with fear over and over again in Mark.<sup>1</sup> But, I've always imagined that Peter's response to the transfiguration is an expression of joy and comfort: “Rabbi, it's good for us to be here; let's make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” I've always assumed that Peter is pleasantly captivated by this mountaintop experience, and insists on preserving it. Isn't that the way we usually think of mountaintop experiences – fleeting thrills that we wish would last?

As it turns out, however, **Peter's response to the transfiguration is not a naïve wish to remain in the moment. Instead, it's a bumbling attempt to mitigate his fear: “Rabbi, it's good for us to be here; let's make three dwellings,**

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<sup>1</sup> See David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark As Story*, Second Edition, 125.

**one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” *I have no idea what’s going on, he must be thinking, but maybe talking will relieve the anxiety.***

“He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

I feel for Peter. For better or worse, he’s usually the first one to speak up. And, his words often betray his misunderstanding, the disciples’ misunderstanding, our own misunderstanding of Jesus’ identity and purpose. It’s Peter who, immediately prior to the trek up the mountain, rebukes Jesus for insisting that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” *You can’t say strange things like that, Rabbi,* Peter pulls Jesus aside to tell him, *you’ll confuse everyone.* And Jesus’ response? “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”<sup>2</sup>

You would think that would teach Peter to think before he speaks. Apparently not. In the very next scene, Peter bears witness to the transfiguration. And, the sudden appearance of icons from Israel’s past and Jesus’ dazzling transformation, following on the heels of his promise of suffering and death – it’s all too much to take in. So, **rather than dwell in the discomfort, Peter reverts to his tendency to blurt out the first thing that comes to mind.**

**Of course, Peter isn’t alone in this tendency. It’s difficult to sit with unsettling experiences, to allow ourselves to feel what we feel, and to resist babbling it away. When we find ourselves at a critical moment, we often rush**

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:31-33.

**to respond in an attempt to mitigate our discomfort. We try to regain control over the situation by inserting some kind of meaning.**

And, this tendency can be foolish, even harmful. At the age of thirty-five, Kate Bowler was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. “It’s just like a bomb went off and everything around me is debris,” she explained in an interview with Rachel Martin, “And I’m thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, did I actually maybe expect that everything was going to work out for me?’” In her new memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I’ve Loved*, Bowler describes the ways her illness has impacted her encounters with others. Not surprisingly, many people have responded to her diagnosis in less-than-helpful ways. She groups them into three categories: minimizers, teachers, and solutions people. Minimizers are the ones who “rush in with a ‘Well, at least you found a good hospital,’ ‘At least you’re on this drug,’ ‘At least you’re not entirely bankrupt.’” As for the teachers,

Very often, they’ve recently watched a documentary, and they have a lot to share with me about what they just learned. And you find yourself immediately going into a moment when you realize that, like, you’re maybe part of a multilevel marketing presentation you didn’t sign up for, like essential oils.

And finally, describing the solutions people, she says:

I think they’re just, like, trying to get me back to a sense of agency, but the problem is, it’s usually, like, what I think of as, like, the tyranny of prescriptive joy. It’s always, like, an emotion they want me to have, or a prayer they want me to try, but, like, there’s something I haven’t tried, and if I would just put my shoulder into it, I would finally do it. And, I just want to tell them, like, every time, ‘I promise, I’m trying my very best, but, like, cut me some slack!’

In the end, Bowler concludes, “The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man, who wrote to me with his policy: ‘Show up and shut up.’”<sup>3</sup>

**We're often at a loss for words at critical moments. So, we tend to say something, anything to try to contain the circumstances, to grasp for control. Could it be, however, that there is wisdom in holding back?** At the critical moment of transfiguration, Jesus ignores Peter's ridiculous suggestion, and the voice of God spells out the disciples' true responsibility: “This is my beloved Son; *listen to him!*” In other words, the appropriate response to this eye-opening, alarming experience is not to say or do anything, but to listen.<sup>4</sup>

**Dear church, there are times when it's ok to be at a loss for words – holy moments that invite our undivided attention but not our hasty reactions. Rather than speak for the sake of speaking – rather than rush immediately to our own responses – God invites us to show up and shut up, that is, to watch, to wait, and to listen for the voice of truth. This kind of attentive silence can be *transfigurative*, allowing us to see things in a new light and hear what we really need to hear.**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/02/08/583774624/what-not-to-say-to-the-terminally-ill-everything-happens-for-a-reason>.

<sup>4</sup> See Raquel S. Lettsome, in *The Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, 197.