

Sermon, February 14, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome Betty Mattingly and her daughter Mary Reisinger¹ who will provide special music. Hopefully, before long, we will be able to worship in person again. If you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments in the meantime, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Since this is Presidents' Day weekend, I thought today's stupid jokes should be presidential. Not me joking about them, but them joking about themselves.

Ronald Reagan once announced, "I'm not worried about the deficit. It's big enough to take care of itself." Gerald Ford, when asked by reporters if he thought President Reagan dyed his hair, said "No. I think he's just prematurely orange."

In response to critics, Abraham Lincoln once asked, "If I really were two-faced, do you think I'd be wearing this one?" Okay, last one. Ulysses S. Grant once told reporters, "I only know two songs. One of them is Yankee Doodle. And the other one isn't."

MUSIC

A reading from Second Corinthians, the fourth chapter

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

¹ [*and her son Tom Mattingly]

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the ninth chapter.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

In addition to Presidents Day Eve, today is also the last Sunday of the season after Epiphany, and most Protestants celebrate today as the Feast of the Transfiguration. Although we haven't always. In fact, Lutherans in Germany stopped observing Transfiguration and many of the other

annual Church festivals right after the Reformation, saying most of them were the invention of human beings and had no real foundation in the Bible.

The Calvinist churches initially rejected ALL liturgical festivals, including Christmas and Easter. Can you imagine? We would NEVER see half of our members. But the early Calvinists thought too much attention had been given to festivals and that detracted from the regular Sunday service, which is itself a weekly celebration of Easter and the resurrection.

Presbyterians didn't separately celebrate Pentecost or even Christmas in their churches until the early 20th Century. But people do change. Even Calvinists. Today the PCUSA is observing Transfiguration Sunday just like we are.

Over at St. Peter's they are reading yet more of Mark, chapter one. I'm not sure what Chip is doing down at St. Matthew's. I think he has a choice of readings, even though the Catholic and traditional Anglican Feasts of the Transfiguration are normally celebrated in August.

Regardless of when they do it, virtually all Mainline Christians agree these days that the Transfiguration is an event worthy of celebrating. Even though most pastors who have to preach on the subject have spent the previous week wishing we weren't. Because it's a story that's...a little weird.

Most scholars think Mark's account of the transfiguration was the first to be written. They say the authors of Matthew and Luke used much of the Gospel of Mark as a source for their own gospels, written ten to fifteen years later. Matthew and Luke typically added information from other sources and corrected Mark's occasional mistakes, meanwhile improving both his grammar and sentence structure.

The fact that the transfiguration isn't even mentioned in the Gospel of John supports the majority belief of scholars that, despite tradition, Apostle John did NOT write the fourth gospel. He was there, after all--one of the few witnesses. Yet the gospel we call John doesn't even mention the Transfiguration. But then again, maybe he just didn't want to talk about it anymore than I do.

In the end, neither Matthew nor Luke changed much of Mark's account, so my guess is they didn't really get it either. All agree Jesus' face changed and/or his clothes became radiantly white and shiny. And all agree Jesus had a conversation with Elijah and Moses, although none ventured a guess as to how or why that happened or what was said.

They also agree God's voice was heard from heaven, and to me that alone would be life-changing. Yet in the end as best I can tell, Jesus and the disciples walked back down the mountain pretty much no different from the way they walked up.

Although the differences are subtle, I have come to prefer Matthew's version of the Transfiguration to Mark's or Luke's, and I'll tell you why. While the latter two have Jesus telling the disciples not to tell anyone what they had just *experienced*, or SEEN, in Matthew Jesus told them not to tell anyone about the *ORAMA* they just had. Interesting.

As most of you know, I'm a science guy. Former Chemistry major and retired health care practitioner and clinical instructor. But I am also a person of faith, and as such I firmly believe God created the heavens and the earth, and while God is not limited by the rules of science and nature, God mostly chooses to work within them.

So yes, I am sometimes skeptical about Jesus stilling storms, walking on water, feeding thousands from virtually nothing, and curing illness, sometimes long-distance, just by willing it.

It's not that I don't believe those things happened. I actually do.

I just tend to imagine more scientific or natural approaches Jesus may have used to accomplish his miracles. So while I certainly don't deny the physical appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain, the shiny face and heavenly voice of the Transfiguration, Matthew's idea that it was really a Horama rather than factual occurrence is much more palatable to inquiring minds like mine.

Horama is the Greek word that literally means "vision." And in the Bible "visions" are popular means of supernatural communication. In fact more than ninety "visions" are described, sometimes in great detail, in the Old Testament alone. In the New Testament, visions are sometimes conflated with dreams. But not so in the Old, where visions are usually respected as divine revelation, while dreams are often viewed as self-serving and frivolous.

The VISIONS, or cha-ZOT or MAR--OT, of folks like Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were considered sacred. When Joseph, on the other hand, came to share his DREAMS with his brothers, they said "Look--here comes the dreamer. Let's kill him." Yikes!

To me, the cool thing about visions as well as dreams is that they can be very real and true without actually being factual, right?

Today psychologists describe both dreams and visions as Altered States of Consciousness. And they list as many as twenty different altered states that humans can experience, ranging from dreaming, daydreaming, hallucinating, hypnotic and meditative trances, to stupor, coma, intoxication and psychosis. They define ASCs as conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are something other than what one might usually consider "normal."

True, science guys like me tend to dismiss ACSs as imaginary or unreal. But it turns out cultural anthropologists say to many, if not most of the world's population, altered states of consciousness are not only real, they are very, very normal.

Take for example the late Erika Eichhorn Bourguignon, who was a well-respected Austrian- American Anthropologist. She studied ASCs extensively, investigating 488 different societies or cultures from all over the globe. Dr. Bourguignon found that more than ninety percent of them consider Altered States of Consciousness to be VERY real, and an important part of the broad-range of human experience that most consider “normal.”

She said WE--the science-biased skeptical types—are actually the EXCEPTION, not the norm. She postulated that over time we have become indoctrinated and enculturated to be selectively inattentive to such states; and that we may very well be missing out on divine communication and a different spiritual reality just because we have convinced ourselves that such things only happen to folks who are either ill or high or nuts.

And yes, that sounds like me. At least in the past, but not so much these days. Because every time I have participated in group discussions of spiritual experiences and the religious paranormal, there are always a few folks who have their own amazing stories to tell, even though they are often reluctant to do so.

My grandmother told a couple of stories about being warned or saved from trouble by some sort of presence she couldn't explain. Maybe it was Jesus, or a guardian angel or maybe my late grandfather's spirit. She didn't know for sure, but it didn't matter. It was part of her reality and quite normal for her. My mother had similar stories, and so have more than a few of my friends.

The experiences described by people are all over the map. Some are associated with actual or impending tragedies or deaths, and some are narrow escapes. They often include fortuitous events too, with special insights, or just different ways of looking at situations and other people.

Pretty much ALL of the ones I have heard have come from people who I trust are NOT sick. Or high. Or nuts. At least for the most part.

In fact, don't tell Joseph's brothers, but sometimes even I admit I wake from a dream with insights or strategies that I'm pretty sure I didn't go to bed with. And while my life, like most has been a series of good and bad decisions, I feel pretty sure I've had outside help with some of the better ones.

That doesn't mean I have sworn off skepticism completely. I think doubt can be an important tool in discernment. Because even the biggest fans of ASCs in the world know not everyone who THINKS God gave them special revelation is correct.

So what do we do with the Transfiguration?

I suppose Martin Luther could have been correct. That today the vision of Elijah and Moses with Jesus was God's way of showing Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

Or maybe the transfiguration was merely a face-saving event for Jesus, who in the verse just before our reading appears to have made a promise he didn't keep.

He promised that some who were standing with him at the time would still be around to see the Kingdom of God coming in power. C.S. Lewis called that the most embarrassing verse in the Bible, in which either Jesus lied or Mark's author did. Because, as Lewis pointed out, said kingdom didn't come, and in fact still hasn't. So maybe the mystical mountain events were supposed to be a mere vision of the coming kingdom, which somehow fulfilled the prediction.

In thinking about this sermon last week, I realized that Christianity really hasn't been very good when it has tried to become an end times

cult. Hundreds of preachers have been warning about the imminent end for two thousand years now, and to date they've all been wrong.

So maybe this entire story is really just a timeless lesson about our God. That we should always be open to God's word and God's will, and that they are sometimes found in places and forms that may surprise us. Maybe we do miss out on a lot in this world. Just because we refuse to see it.

In other words, as another President, George W. Bush might put it, in this day and age perhaps too many Christians have "mis-underestimated Jesus." So we should not limit God to only the kinds of action or methods that we expect.

Because in the end I suspect God really CAN speak from a cloud, or glow with a heavenly glow. God can surely part the sea, move a mountain, show us a vision and even raise the dead.

Speaking of which, Bill Clinton said being President is kind of like working in a cemetery. He said there are a lot of people under you, but nobody is listening. President James Garfield once remarked, "Man cannot live by bread alone. Then added he must also have peanut butter."

Amen
