

Mark 9:2-9 The Great Light

The central event in anyone's life comes when they decide what they believe about Jesus. One of the themes in The Gospel of Mark that we will explore beginning next Sunday in the Lenten Bible Study, has to do with the identity of Jesus.

Before we are encouraged to understand what Jesus has done, we are compelled to ask who Jesus is. As we have seen, even the demons know who he is, but the people are slow to apprehend.

Once the disciples can give the answer they are presented at best as failing to understand the meaning that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed, the long-awaited one, the Son of God.

Right in the center of the Markan story, Jesus confronts his closest followers with the question, "Who do people say that I am?" This question is really only a setup so that he can ask the question that confronts us all, "who do *you* say that I am?" It is Peter that answers for all of them, "You are the Christ."

Like it is with us, the disciples do not start out with this knowledge. It takes awhile for this answer to come to the disciples. When Peter makes the confession, they are all exposed for their lack of understanding.

Learning the meaning that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Son of God, is much of what the Christian spiritual life is about. It requires an education.

Suffering and Death

The first part of the education is to shatter the expectations of the believers. One might suppose that if Jesus is truly the Son of God, there will be some smashing victory, some show of strength that God is really behind it all.

For the Jewish people of Galilee and Judea, the victory over the Romans (as unlikely as it may have been), combined with the re-establishment of the Davidic monarchy, a sovereign Israel, would be convincing enough. For us? A victory in the culture war? Social justice? Evangelistic success?

But that is not what they get. Instead, Jesus tells them that, "the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and he must be killed, and after three days, rise again." The text tells us that he spoke plainly about these things.

They did not seem to understand this plain teaching. As a matter of fact, Peter began to rebuke Jesus. It is an interesting exchange in which Jesus addresses Peter as if he were Satan himself, and in the course of which Jesus makes this astonishing assertion,

“If anyone would come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

All of this, the sacrifice and suffering of things, the reversal of the world’s value system, the denial of self and the embracing of a life of service and discipleship; all of this, is part of the lesson that each believer must confront and struggle; the first part. It is challenging and can be difficult and is a lifelong endeavor.

Transfiguration

According to the witness of the Gospel of Mark, this “shattering of expectations,” and its related emphases is not the only part of the education in the faith. We also learn from this experience of Transfiguration.

It was Peter and James and John who were allowed to see it, but I am sure we each have had similar experiences, in kind if not degree. Christ encounters each in unique ways.

These three were taken up on a mountain, which is the place of profound religious/spiritual significance, and there they saw the “transfigured” Jesus. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than any bleach could make them. And there with him stood Moses and Elijah, the great symbols of the Law and Prophets, the twin pillars of Jewish spiritual life.

Peter, it is always Peter, thinks it best to stay there and showing a tremendous ability to misunderstand, suggests they build houses so they can just stay there.

But, as is most always true, these experiences when there is clarity, are not meant to be memorialized, but are better seen as marching orders, pointing the direction ahead.

Then the whole scene was taken away in a cloud, from which came a voice like the one Jesus heard at his baptism, “This is my son, whom I love, listen to him.” Then everything went back to what was for them normal; just Jesus, no white garments, no Moses or Elijah, no cloud, no voice.

Meaning

What do we do with these experiences that give clarity to our lives; in part because in them we catch a glimpse of how things really are in this world of confusion with its transitoriness and illusions, and partly because we are able to see briefly what is less important, what is passing away.

This world is passing away - the political, cultural, social, and economic circumstances that take up one’s attention and spend so much anxiety; and all the personal situations, whatever they may be, that consume time and energy, and cause us such despair sometimes.

It is right for us to live in them, the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and do what is required of us, “live in the needs of the day,” as Buechner put it.

It is good for us to work for justice, to help the poor, to bear witness to our faith, to find ways to help whenever we have opportunity. It is good to have compassion for others and seek to remedy what can be remedied.

All the while remembering that the service and sacrifice are accompanied by a Great Light that transfigures our lives, shining into the darkness of our days so that we can see what is real; the Grace of God, Mercy and Righteousness.

So let the story be an encouragement and an inspiration. May it remind us each one of our own experience of Christ, when we became believers, or sure of our calling; when it was not about doctrine that made sense or going along with others because their affirmations made us feel accepted, when it had nothing to do with expectation of reward or punishment, when it was a maybe simple encounter that we maybe didn't understand; maybe still don't understand, but when Jesus flamed up into the Great Light that sometimes blinds, sometimes illuminates, but always shines . . .

And let it turn us as Peter said it did him, towards love, as he said in the 2nd letter, “Make every effort to add to your faith goodness, and to goodness knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control perseverance, and to perseverance godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.”

What do you believe about Jesus?

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