

Sermon—“Bearing Witness”

2/14/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Let’s go for a hike,” Jesus said to Peter, James, and John. That morning, the three of them had been planning to go with the other disciples to a nearby town, where a man had brought his son to be healed. After the last six days, healing the boy—or at least attempting to, as we hear—would be a good distraction. The last time they had spoken with Jesus, he had told them that he would soon undergo great suffering and be killed, before being resurrected on the third day. “Who among you,” Jesus had left them wonder, “are willing to take up your cross and follow me? Who among you might join me in not tasting death until the coming of God’s Kingdom?”

These are difficult questions, ones with which I struggle and which I’m guessing many of you do as well. Now imagine asking them when taking up one’s cross is not just a figure of speech, but a harbinger of what may be to come, of your suffering and death. For Peter, James and John, those six days must have felt like an eternity. Going on a hike with Jesus must have also felt like an opportunity too good to pass up. So off they went with Jesus, most likely towards either Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon, the latter of which according to some scholars once went by another name, Mount Sinai.

As Jesus and the three disciples walked up the mountain, the hike seemed like any other. They were walking and talking, enjoying the fresh air and each other’s company, when the most amazing thing happened. Suddenly, Jesus transfigured right before their eyes. In that moment, Jesus’ face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white, while Moses and Elijah

appeared alongside him, talking with him. Words cannot truly describe what Peter, James, and John saw that day or the awe that overcame them as they looked upon three pillars of their faith.

“What if this is the end of days,” Peter soon began thinking to himself. Each year, the Israelites remembered the forty years they had spent wandering in the wilderness with the Festival of Tabernacles, or *Sukkoth*. It was believed that the Messiah would eventually usher in the Kingdom of God during that festival, a time during which the Israelites lived outside in tents and other temporary dwellings. “Rabbi,” Peter said to Jesus, “it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter may not have known much about the end of days, but he was fairly confident that it would include the putting up of tents. Outside of that, he was left speechless and terrified, just like James and John.

Their fear was only natural. I mean, who among us wouldn’t be afraid if we saw Jesus standing here in front of us, his face and clothes radiating, not to mention Elijah and Moses? I’m pretty sure I would be, and that’s before the cloud even appeared. From that cloud, we hear, a voice declared, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” A voice and message echoing back to Jesus’ baptism, when the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, as well as to what Jesus had said to them just six days prior.

Six days. Throughout his Gospel, Mark rarely makes specific references to time. Six days, the amount of time it would have taken for Jesus and the three disciples to walk to Mount Tabor. Perhaps, this is the significance of the number. Then again, six days was also the amount of time that Moses waited on Mount Sinai before God called him up into the cloud to receive the Ten Commandments. Jesus was staying with the disciplines in Caesarea Philippi, which is located at the foot of Mount Hermon, the supposed Mount Sinai. And the similarities do not end here. In each story, Moses is present, God speaks from a cloud, and God’s presence causes a

person's face to begin shining. How long do you think that it took for Peter, James, and John to start picking up on these similarities, to begin realizing that something more was taking place, something which spoke to the very heart of who Jesus was and is?

That day, the transfiguration ceased just as quickly as it had begun. In an instant, Moses and Elijah disappeared and Jesus' face and clothes returned to normal. It took a little longer for Peter, James, and John to regain their composure. As the four of them walked down the mountain, Jesus answered their questions about the role that Elijah would play at the end of days. He also gave them an order. "Tell no what about what you have seen until after I rise from the dead." And as we hear, they kept the matter to themselves. Or, to put it a different way, they listened to Jesus, just as God had told them.

When Peter, James, and John eventually told the other disciples, much had changed. They had witnessed Jesus take up his cross and die on it, as well as his resurrection from the dead. Before these events, they never could have understood the depth of what Jesus meant when he said that he is both the Son of Man and Son of God, both human and divine, that death does not have the final word, or that the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet. These truths, which Jesus revealed in the transfiguration and ensuing days, could only make sense in a post-resurrection world. And here's the good news: that's the world we're living in right now.

God's Kingdom has broken into this world, and in order for us to live into that Kingdom, we must each take up our cross. In part, this means that we must be willing to bear witness. What would the point of the transfiguration have been if Peter, James, and John had not been there? Yes, Jesus would have still had a conversation with Moses and Elijah. And yet, what makes the transfiguration so powerful is that Peter, James, and John were there to witness it and would later tell others about what they had seen. If not for them, we would always be left to wonder, "If a

tree falls in a forest or a transfiguration happens on a mountain, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Each of us has been called to bear witness to the power and presence of Jesus in our lives. We have been called to do so because through our witness others may come to know who Jesus really is. And doing so will require that we show dedication and devotion, not so different than Elisha did so long ago.

When the time had come for Elijah to ascend to heaven, he and Elisha had just left Gilgal. Three times, we hear, Elijah turned to his successor and told him to stay there, but Elisha refused to leave his side. You see, Elisha wanted to make sure that he would be wise enough, devout enough, and courageous enough to take up Elijah’s mantle, so he asked the prophet if he might inherit a “double share” of his spirit. To which Elijah responded, “You have asked a hard thing. To do so, you must bear witness to my ascension. You must remain by my side and watch as God takes me away.” When the chariots of fire drawn by horses of fire descended, Elisha must have been tempted to look the other way. I know I would have been. But Elisha refused. Rather than hide his face, he stayed at Elijah’s side, bearing witness that day, and bearing witness every day that followed.

This Wednesday, we will mark the beginning of our Lenten journey with ashes. Bearing the sign of the cross on our foreheads, we will wear Christ’s claim on our lives—that everything we are and have is a gift from God, from our birth to our death, from dust to dust. And any other year, we would bear witness to this claim by wearing our ashes out into the world for all to see. Yes, this year will be different, but that does not mean our call is not the same. What are you thinking of giving up this Lent? As Christians, we give something up because we believe that abstaining from something which we desire, that fasting from it, can help us turn our lives and hearts back towards God. Now, I must admit, often I cannot think of something worth giving up,

so a few years ago I began taking the opposite approach. If Lent is about turning back towards God, then perhaps one of the best things we can do is take something on. Maybe it's a more focused prayer life or commitment to reading God's Word, maybe it's giving more generously to the poor and the downtrodden, or maybe it's devoting more time to listening to the Jesus and bearing witness to what we hear. When we incorporate these and other spiritual disciplines into our lives, we open ourselves up to God, allowing God to lift us up, help us take up our cross, and bear it for all to see. Praise be to God for this gift, the gift of God's Beloved Son, in whom we see in a glimpse of God's heavenly Kingdom.; a glimpse to which we have been called to go out and bear witness, this and every day of our lives. Amen.