

“A TIME TO KEEP SILENCE”

Mark 9:2-9

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, each tell a version of this event—Jesus’ transfiguration. Each gospel writer struggles to describe it. At best, they merely point to the event to say, “This amazing thing happened. We don’t have the answers. But join us. Look upon him. Stand beside us and be transfixed along with us.”

For what happens today is one of the most mesmerizing, fascinating, captivating events in all of human history. Looking back over the course of human existence, there are events that stand out above all others, and that still remain unexplained, even though there were people there as witnesses, and people writing down what happened. The testimonies and observations remain, but explanations and depth of understanding continue to elude us all. Can you imagine being Moses, seeing the bush burning, but strangely not consumed, a voice speaking, but you cannot hear where it comes from or where it’s going? Can you imagine being one of the Hebrews, convinced of your impending death at the hands of the encroaching Egyptian army? But the staff strikes the surf, and the wind pounds the waters. They surge upward, making a path for you. Can you imagine being Elisha as Elijah is taken from you in a fiery whirlwind, an infernal chariot, horses composed of solar flares, swooping down and carrying him away? Or can you imagine being Isaiah, standing in a temple filled with the hem of the robe of God. The Transfiguration is just such a stunning, inexplicable event. To have been on that high mountain, most if not all of us would likely have stood there overwhelmed, silent.

But in Mark’s telling of the Transfiguration, rather than joining James and John in the silence, Peter interrupts the Transfiguration with—well—no one seems to know what he’s talking about. Like a strange photobomb tucked into the Scripture, Peter is cheesing while everyone else is caught up in the moment. First, less than a week after making his stunning confession that Jesus is the Messiah, he now calls Jesus “Rabbi,” which at that time was the near equivalent to our word for “Sir.” Second, in spite of seeing Jesus’ face mysteriously, shockingly transformed, Peter already knows what to say. “It’s good to be here!” he declares. Then he suggests building some tents for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus. Who knows how long Peter would have gone on yammering if a cloud hadn’t overwhelmed them and the voice of God hadn’t interrupted him. Mark, in retrospect, says Peter didn’t know what he was saying—they were all terrified.

Ecclesiastes says, “There’s a time to be silent, and a time to speak.” Notice that in the order of the phrasing, a time to be silent comes *first*. Then later, once you’ve had time to discern, then speak. But first, there is a time for silence.

At the end of last summer, there was the great event that many of us scrambled to get to, because it just happened to be coming our way this time – the solar eclipse. I went with my family to Bryson City, which was in the path of totality. We went and waited for the moon to cross over

the sun. When it finally happened, I remember removing my eclipse glasses, for just that one minute, and being dumbfounded.

I can try to explain it, but can't do it justice. It looked like a ring of fire surrounding a dark abyss, a black hole – I can't do it justice! So, I took my iPhone out [laughter], and I tried to take a picture of it, and tucked it back in my pocket, and enjoyed the rest of that minute. On the ride home, I was flipping through my pictures, and there it was. There was my picture of the 'solar eclipse,' and it looked like a grainy, bad picture of the plain old sun. You couldn't tell at all that it was an eclipse, and all I could do was chuckle to myself. God wouldn't let me have it, wouldn't let me keep it and preserve it – too big, too mysterious!

If you've ever been to the Holy Land, you may have seen it. On the traditional site of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before his arrest, there is a beautiful church called the "Church of All Nations." Pilgrims often find it to be a respite from the hustle and bustle of touristy destinations. It's quiet and serene inside because on the outside there's a sign that reads, "PLEASE: NO EXPLANATIONS IN THE CHURCH." Come in and be. Just, BE! As the Psalmist says, *Be still and know that I am God...* (Ps. 46:10). But in this church, you can go and pray that Psalm, silently. Be still. Be still. Be quiet, and know.

When I was in the Holy Land, it seemed like Peter had been everywhere, pitching tents on every single significant sight of Jesus' life. Where it is said that Jesus was born, church. Where it is said Jesus died, church. Where it is said he was raised, church. A church near where it is said he was baptized. Where he preached the Sermon on the Mount, church. Where Jesus ascended, church. Where Jesus first sneezed, church. I think they found a church where Jesus hid his first report card from his parents.

I got tired of all these church-tents. "Can we not just have a place without a church?" I bemoaned. But there was this one church called The Church of St. Anne, located near the Pool of Bethesda, the healing pool. It's a plain, simple, asymmetrical church, unassuming. You walk in the entrance and everything inside it could pass as a Baptist church. There's very little ornamentation – no colors or paintings on the walls. The ceilings, pillars, and walls are charmingly, enchantingly unequal, but the acoustics are incredible!

And I remember crossing the threshold, and finally having a place where I could be still and know that God is God, and everything would be quiet, and there wouldn't be anyone trying to sell me anything, or explain anything, and I just sat. And I was by myself, until a group of Italians entered the church. And they began to sing a hymn that filled the church with so much beauty, I could hardly contain my tears. All I could write in my journal that night was, they sang a hymn, and I almost cried. That's all I could say. There wasn't anything else to say. It was *apocalyptic*.

What is apocalyptic? Apocalyptic is something that you can't contain or explain. It's something that God does that you can't explain. It just happens. It's when God's dream for you breaks into the present from outside. Apocalyptic is when God reveals a glimpse of your destiny, in a time, and in a place that is otherwise, normal and unassuming—in a car, beside someone's bed, hiking a trail, standing over the kitchen sink, maybe even in a sanctuary.

I remember a stunning moment of clarity in my call to ministry. One of the things they ask you to do in seminary is, “Can you tell us about your call to ministry?” I always found myself back-peddling, because it was too big. If there’s a moment, and not everybody has a moment that they can point to, but I’m grateful to God that I do. But there was this moment, and I can’t explain it. I remember where I was. I remember having to hold on to the banister of the stairwell. But, then, I’ve already said too much.

Has anything apocalyptic ever happened to you, anything extraordinary—the birth of a child, a revelation through something you were reading, or something someone said to you—when all of a sudden, everything around you disappeared, and you received a kind of clarity. Perhaps you were sitting beside a hospital bed of a loved one, and holding their hand as they breathed their last breath, and your only instinct was to be silent. Slip off your shoes to stand on holy ground.

What is an appropriate response to apocalyptic? Silence is a good one. Fainting is also nice. Passing out is also a practice commended to us by the Apostle of John, the Revelator. Remember the first chapter of Revelation. A figure, the Son of Man, shows up, and his face? His eyes are like fire, and his hair is white like wool, and his voice sounds like whatever it sounds like when you’re standing underneath Niagara Falls, and his tongue was like a sword, and John says, “I fell down as though dead.”

That’s an appropriate response to apocalyptic. To transfiguration. On Easter Sunday morning, I’m going to tell you the story again of Mark’s version of the resurrection. Do you remember it? When the women left the tomb running for fear and amazement—the word is *ecstasy*—and seized them, and they told no one anything, for they were afraid? So, running in fear for your life is a very appropriate response to apocalyptic. Silence, fainting, running for your life – all very relevant responses. Talking, explaining, capturing, preserving? Not so good.

But don’t you have to have something to build a church? Don’t you have to have something solid? Don’t you need an explanation, a stone foundation, some pilings, something to stand on and hold on to? Yes, but the church has plenty of that.

Doesn’t God also build the church on fear and trembling, amazement, awe? There’s not enough of this. But God builds the church on all of this. Now Jesus’ body, as Mark tells us, his face was transformed into such a rare moment that the word he uses for metamorphosis is only used a few more times, and His clothes, as I’ve said, were a brilliant white.

...The same body that was transfigured in this stunning moment now lies before us on this communion table. I could try to explain it to you: “See, the bread has this character, and the wine represents—” But I would have already said too much.

So...I’ll stop there. Because God is God. *God is God!* God is who God is. And God will be who God will be! Beyond this stunning truth, I couldn’t possibly know what else say...

