

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Guest Preacher: Richard F. Hanks

## February 22, 2009 Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Peter 1:16-21

Mark 9:2-9

### **Look and Listen!**

Let us pray. – *Lord this morning we pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit we may realize your presence in our midst. Father open our minds, our hearts, our eyes and our ears so that through our own epiphany may we receive your Son as Lord, answering his call to “Come follow me.” Amen*

Today brings us to the last Sunday of Epiphany better known to us as Transfiguration Sunday. During these past weeks in the season of Epiphany we have traveled with Jesus during his Galilean ministry as told to us in the Gospel of Mark. What a wonderful narrative this is.

We witnessed the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and heard the voice of God speak to Jesus “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

We heard Jesus speak to the original twelve disciples the words “Come, follow me,” and they left behind their current lives to follow after Jesus. The disciples witnessed Jesus teaching with a new authority in the synagogue at Capernaum. They were with Jesus as he cast out the demons from a man so violent that he had to be chained to prevent his own self-mutilation. The disciples walked with Jesus through the villages as he healed the lepers and cured the cripples.

As the narrative of Jesus told to us in the Gospel of Mark progresses we see that Jesus’ fame is spreading very quickly throughout Galilee. The fame that Jesus has started to acquire during his ministry does not come without considerable scrutiny from King Herod and the Jerusalem Temple officials who now think of Jesus as a threat to the status quo of their power.

We read that when Jesus enters a village, this charismatic Nazarene is surrounded by people who seek after Him for a myriad of reasons. Some come to Him in hope of physical or spiritual healing. Some come to Him to receive His teaching and hope of a better life. Others come to Him in the hope that this man from Nazareth is the promised Messiah who will free their country from the oppressive rule of Rome. The point is, these growing crowds of followers all have different motivations, different hopes and different levels of understanding of who this man Jesus is.

The group of twelve disciples was no exception to this lack of consensus as to who is this man Jesus. In fact the lack of ability by his disciples to fully comprehend who Jesus truly is, is the

central theme of the Gospel of Mark. In the language of today, we would say that the disciples “Just didn’t get it.”

What we do know is that Jesus was a wonderful and powerful teacher. The bulk of his teaching and preaching to the crowds was in the form of parables or what we would call today, riddles. Jesus knew that his listeners who were in relationship with God would understand the riddle through the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who were not in a right relationship with God; Herod’s spies, the wealthy who only sought after their own welfare, violent Palestinian anarchists or in part his own disciples, would not truly understand what he was saying – they could hear his words, but they could not listen with full understanding.

The author of Mark tells us that Jesus is hearing reports that his group of followers perceives him in many different ways. In the eighth chapter of Mark Jesus asks his twelve disciples “Who do *they* say I am?” The disciples answer him saying “John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others say you are one of the other prophets.” Jesus then asks the disciples “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter quickly answers “You are the Messiah.”

Mark goes on to tell us that with Peter’s answer Jesus sternly orders them to not tell anyone about him. Jesus goes on to prophesy that he will be rejected by the scribes, the Pharisees and the Chief Priests and then tells his disciples that he will be killed and after three days will rise from the grave. The disciples are stunned. They are perplexed. They are confused - what can this resurrection mean? Do not tell anyone about who I am? Why would Jesus give us that order? Because they simply didn’t understand who this man truly was. Their epiphany of Jesus was incomplete and flawed.

Jesus did not rebuke or castigate his twelve disciples over their flawed answer to his question, but instead decides to take Peter, James and John with him and as Mark tells us leads them up “a high mountain.” Why just those three disciples and why up a high mountain? For Jesus the mountain was a sacred place. It was where Moses had received the Ten Commandments; it was where we read of the presence of God in the burning bush. It was a place of solitude where Jesus would often go to pray and be in the presence of His Father.

What happens next is truly amazing. Mark tells us “He was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” The original Greek word for transfigured is “morphe”, which means took on divine form. Imagine the scene on that mountain - Jesus is suddenly transformed into divine form and his humble peasant tunic becomes a brilliant dazzling white, and with him now appears Elijah and Moses.

Mark tells us that Peter did not know what to say, “for they were terrified.”

Mark goes on to tell us that Peter then speaks 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” and with his words he shows his lack of understanding of the miracle he has just witnessed. Peter saw what he wanted to – he saw Elijah and Moses as standard bearers of the old covenant that enslaved the people of Israel and to which he blindly adhered. Peter, James and John were eyewitnesses to the miraculous transforming power of God, but they just couldn’t see what was truly before their eyes.

Several years ago my daughter was taken to the hospital after her summer camp physical found a huge mass in her abdomen. We consulted with physicians and surgeons and she was scheduled for surgery the next morning. Her mother had died of cancer four years earlier and I was devastated by the thought of what this might all mean. She went into surgery and after a week of recovery came home. From that point on she made quarterly trips into Boston for four years to be monitored for any possible reoccurrence of tumors. A month prior to her departure for college we traveled to Boston for her quarterly exam. Our worst nightmare came true as the radiologist came to me and told me there was another mass in her abdomen. She would need another surgery. She might not be able to start college with her first year class. That was a Thursday afternoon. We were told to come back to the hospital on Monday for a CAT scan and surgery.

We called our family and friends throughout the country and her name was offered up in prayer in many churches. We prayed for her without ceasing, you prayed for her during Sunday worship. We arrived at the hospital on Monday morning, the CAT scan was taken and the doctor came out to me. His face was ashen. He said to me “I can’t explain it. The tumor is gone. Take your daughter home.” He couldn’t explain it. As a person of faith, I needed no explanation – in front of me was the miracle and transforming power of God’s answered prayer.

Like my daughter’s physician, Peter, rather than pray and reflect on the meaning of the miracle he saw that day, just can’t explain the miracle of the Transfiguration. As a man of good intentions Peter wants to build three dwellings, to *do something* in response to what he has just seen. Rather than discern what this all means for his life, to spend time in prayer, he has to *do something*, and gets caught up in the snares of over-analysis and over-activity. Perhaps Peter wants to build those huts to have his mountain-top experience prolonged in order to avoid going down the mountain into the waiting arms of rejection, fear and the demands of life that he has experienced as a disciple of Jesus. Peter in the midst of his own demons can’t see the divinity of Jesus and the miracle of the Transfiguration that is before his very eyes.

I wonder this morning, what would have been our reaction to the stunning power of that moment of transfiguration on that mountain? Would we have been terrified and speechless in the presence of God? Do the demons of our over-activity prevent us from entering into a richer relationship with Christ through prayer? When we see miracles unfold before our eyes do we come before God with adoration or do we attempt to analyze and dissect the mystery before us? Do the demands of life, especially in these uncertain financial times cause us to cling onto what we have in fear, and not trust in the providence of God?

I’m here to tell you this morning that God is faithful. On that mountain top, God reached out to Peter, James and John in love to offer them a foretaste of the glory of Christ’s resurrection. God broke through the silence of their fear and confusion with His words “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him.” God was giving these disciples the true answer to Jesus’ question “Who do you say I am?” “

I invite you this morning to journey with Jesus to the mountain top where you can behold a foretaste of the glory of the Risen Christ. I invite you to allow God to reach out to you in love and to respond by truly hearing and trusting in God’s words “This is my Son, the Beloved.”

As we begin this Lenten Season I invite you to prayerfully journey with Jesus to Calvary and leave your fears, your doubts, and your demons at the foot of the cross, believing in the glorious promise of Easter morning.

I invite you this morning in the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior to look and to listen, and through the power of the Holy Spirit to see and hear, to answer the question “Who do you say that I am” by your confession of faith, “You are Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Beloved.”

Amen.