

Second Sunday of Lent - B

What was the point of the transfiguration? Why would Jesus take the closest of his disciples up the mountain for a special encounter?

The closest I can come to an answer is something along the lines of “desperate times call for desperate measures.” Not that Jesus was desperate, but it does appear in the Gospel of Mark that he was dealing with a group of disciples who had a very difficult time getting what he was trying to tell them, and there does seem to be a sense of urgency about it all.

And among the disciples, if he was going to get through to them, he had to start with the ones who had shown the most leadership.

On the mountain Jesus is transfigured. His clothes become dazzling white, as if they were acting like a lamp shade, toning down the light that was emanating from inside of them.

Jesus was that light. And seeing him like that must surely have given the disciples pause to reconsider who they thought he was. Nothing in the tradition ever said anything about the Messiah shining forth like a light bulb. The disciples were going to have to think again if they harbored any thoughts that they knew who Jesus truly was. Who, in all of humanity could shine forth as Jesus was doing?

It’s interesting to me that the encounter on the mountaintop is not just about Jesus and three of his

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disciples. Elijah and Moses also make an appearance: the whole Jewish tradition—Moses of the Law and Elijah of the prophets—are involved. And their roles are subordinate to that of Jesus.

More importantly, God the Father envelopes everyone in a cloud and repeats the words he spoke to Jesus at his baptism, this time for the disciples benefit: “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

On the mountain everything comes together for the disciples. They can no longer mistake what is going on. Not only is Jesus the Messiah, he is God’s own Son! And they have been given an assignment: “Listen to Jesus.” No more backtalk (Peter!), no more arguing, no more balking at what Jesus tells them to do.

Time is running out. They can’t afford to be dragging their feet.

So far, so good. But the revelation is not over. As they are coming down the mountain Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

As important as the experience of Jesus’ transfiguration was to the disciples, it could contain all of what Jesus is about. The whole story will not be known until Jesus has risen from the dead, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the disciples.

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Then they will see the paschal mystery in its completeness. In the meantime, they must listen!

I think of myself as a good listener—in some situations anyway. If I can use what I've learned to help someone else, I'm happy to do that, and oftentimes that's what I'm listening for: to see whether anything that I know can be brought to bear on the situation the other person is portraying to me.

The listening required of a disciple includes that sort of listening, but goes beyond it. Listening becomes much harder when what we are hearing confronts us in our favorite convictions or we are hearing something said to us that goes against how we like to think of ourselves.

In Mark's Gospel the story of the transfiguration follows after the question Jesus poses to his disciples about who they think he is. Peter is right in saying that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is wrong in thinking he knows all of what the Messiah is about.

When Jesus starts talking about how the Messiah must suffer and die, Peter interrupts him and says, "That can't happen!" At that point, he has quit listening to Jesus.

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It's hard to say when we quit listening to Jesus, but we all do at some time or another. Maybe when we hear Jesus quietly telling us that we must forgive if we want to be forgiven, we think "That will never happen!"

Or maybe it's when Jesus suggests to us that we carry some of the blame when a relationship with someone goes sour, and we just won't hear of it.

The road ahead of the disciples was going to be difficult and the road ahead for us will be, too. Our only hope is to listen to Jesus, who has gone that way before us.

The only way we will experience the life of resurrection is if we listen to Jesus in the everyday living out of our lives, even when he is saying to us that we must pick up our cross and follow him.

He knows that way that leads to life, and he is calling out to us so that we may follow him.