

February 11, 2018 – Last Sunday in Epiphany
Transfiguration Sunday
“When We Don’t Know What to Say”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Mark 9:2-9

Epiphany has a rather strange beginning and an equally strange ending – but I guess that is not terribly surprising when it comes to Jesus’ life. The gospel stories in Epiphany – after we get beyond the visit of the Magi – are all stories that “**enlighten**” us as to just who Jesus was and is. They are stories of revelation – manifestation – and a growing understanding that truly this was the Son of God.

It begins with Jesus’ baptism. In Mark’s account (which we have been reading over the past several weeks) we see that “Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven that, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”(Mk 1:11)

The words are spoken directly to Jesus – and WE merely observe this theophany – this manifestation or in-breaking of God into the course of human events.

And today, at the end of this “season of light” we witness another theophany, but with a slightly different twist. The setting couldn’t have been more different. We began at the river Jordan where Jesus initiates his public ministry by hearing the affirmation of God, but today we are up on a high and precarious mountain. I know because I’ve been there.

It’s not a pleasant trip. You actually pay money to get into a small cab (which itself doesn’t appear to be all that safe) commandeered by a wild Israeli driver who seemingly takes great delight at traversing, full-throttle, up an extremely narrow and very windy road (which, of course, has no guard rails) to the supposed sight of Jesus’ transfiguration. By the time you get there you have said every prayer you have ever memorized as you release your white-knuckle grip from the anything that seems even remotely permanent in the cab, and make your way to a rather unimpressive spot.

It is hear, folks believe, that God spoke yet again, but this time using the demonstrative case – not speaking TO Jesus, but instead to those gathered – namely, the disciples. Not YOU are, but “THIS is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!”

Mark says they were terrified by what they saw and what they heard. Jesus’ clothes had become dazzling white – whiter than anything they had ever seen. A cloud enveloped them. God’s voice spoke, and they had no idea how to respond.

The scripture states that Peter began fumbling – trying to respond in an appropriate manner. He went about gathering supplies to make some booths or dwellings – one for Moses and one for Elijah, and finally one for Jesus as he started to say, “Rabbi it is good

that we are here.” Truth be told he was so terrified, so caught off guard and blown away by the whole thing, so shocked and filled with fear that it says “**he didn’t know what to say**” - **let alone know what to do.**

I realize that moment is certainly not the main point of the story, yet it’s a line that continues to grab my attention as I read and re-read this lesson for the final Sunday of Epiphany this year – Transfiguration Sunday. And that usually means I had better pay attention. I’ve heard countless Transfiguration Day sermons on the symbolism of Moses and Elijah, or the need to leave the mountaintop experience and return to the “valley of human need,” and even about the voice of God declaring, yet again, the messianic nature of Jesus. I’ve probably preached a few of these myself.

But this time around it is that line referring to the terrified Peter – “He didn’t know what to say,” that haunts me.

It’s a situation we find ourselves in quite frequently, isn’t it? Whether the incident is one of shock as we become aware of a sudden loss, or surprise from news that leaves us speechless – whether it be due to unbridled happiness or unspeakable sorrow. What do we do - how DO we respond - when we don’t know what to say?

Peter, as is the case for many of us, initially became active and verbose. He started “doing things” as he took on an impromptu building project and began yammering on for his own comfort. The moment terrified him. The silence nearly drove him crazy. So, he did and said some ridiculous things.

It’s a common reaction we encounter often - especially when confronted with unspeakable sorrow. When we don’t know what to do or even more difficult – when we don’t know what to say, more often than not, we get caught up in doing and saying things that are not helpful, and in some cases even harmful or hurtful. So, a common response, in order to protect ourselves, is often avoidance. We stay away fearing we will say or do the wrong thing. I want to challenge that instinct by insisting that such a reaction and response can be even MORE harmful as the one in need feels all alone, isolated, fending for him/herself.

This week, I had one of those terrible phone calls. It came from a member of my previous congregation where I served as Senior Minister for 6 years. The call was to inform me that the son of my former Director of Christian Education had committed suicide. I was shocked beyond words and terrified not knowing what to do. Yep, it even happens to those of us supposedly trained in this kind of work.

The phone call came in rather late, so I waited until the next day to give myself time to pray, reflect, and think about how I might respond in ways that might be helpful. Finally, I placed the call, kind of hoping no one would pick up. On first attempt they didn’t. Somewhat relieved, I left a very brief message, stating that I loved them, my heart ached for them, that there really ARE no words, and that I would continue to try again to make contact.

It's so hard to know what to do – what to say. Just knowing and admitting that, may help us understand Peter just a little better.

If you've ever been in that situation – you know exactly what I am talking about. So afraid you'll say the wrong thing, you either begin talking non-stop or feel paralyzed altogether and do everything imaginable to avoid the situation.

On the other hand, if you've ever been the one in pain – directly facing the loss – you know how awkward that can be as well, as you hear the pious platitudes that come your way. So rather than coach you on what is appropriate or not in these situations - because each situation is somewhat different - I thought I'd offer a few things that I've learned along the way:

1. Don't avoid the person in pain. While this may be our human instinct initially, the one hurting needs you now more than ever. When someone you know loses a loved one through death, or we receive terrible news about something in our own lives, the situation becomes even more painful if we feel we have to go it alone. When tragedy strikes, we are often left wondering, "Where is God?" Doubt and confusion may be insurmountable. It is then that your presence reminds the one hurting that God is with us as you embody God's abiding Presence simply by being present.
2. Don't think too hard about what you should or should not say. Your presence – in person, by phone, and if it's the only way possible – through mail will say everything necessary. Words pale in comparison to your truly "BEING WITH" the one in pain. In fact, your words mean very little and will likely not be remembered. It's you that makes the difference. Make every effort to be fully present by whatever means possible.
3. Do not think you have to defend God by what you say. God will be able to do this alone. This is where our language, more often than not gets us into trouble. For some reason we think we need to bail God out – as if the accident or the tragedy was God's intention and by implication God's fault. Phrases like, "Well, you know God doesn't give us any more than we can handle," or "You know this must have been God's will," or "Oh, now she is in a much better place." Even if you believe these statements, they are your understanding of the situation but not necessarily the beliefs of the one hurting. Once again, saying less is best. Listening, reassuring, holding space for the one in pain is your gift.
4. Offer comfort through words such as, "What are you doing to take care of yourself?" Or better still, "How are you allowing others to care for you?" Don't ask them "What do you need?" Rather, offer, "Would it be okay if I bring over some food this Friday? It will be in a plastic container, so you can freeze it if need be."

5. Finally, it is very helpful to hear words like, “This is a very dark time right now. I am sorry. But I promise you, it will get better. (Be careful, this can only be said if you have walked a similar path). No allusions need be made to what you went through. “I know exactly what you are going through,” is inappropriate. You Don’t. On the other hand, if they want to know about your experience, they will ask.

I was finally able to make contact with my hurting friends. It was a painful phone call. I’ll need to call again, and visit when I am back in Denver. These are not easy nor pleasant experiences, but they are times when our faith deepens, matures, and grows as we discover in new ways what it means to be the church as we experience love even in despair.

When Peter finally did slow down – and became just a little more grounded – he listened to the voice of God and in an instant, he looked around and noticed no one was there, **but only Jesus** – the scriptures report. Only Jesus. What a beautiful and reassuring sight that must have been for him.

As we go into our silence today, I leave you with that image on the Transfiguration Sunday – but only Jesus. Perhaps you might imagine yourself alone with him with no words to say – but only Jesus.

Amen.