

## Un-Boxing Jesus

Mark 9:2-9

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### A Sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent February 22, 2009

How appropriate that our sanctuary has been transfigured - scaffolding towers removed - just in time for Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration Sunday is a doorway, a doorway between the Season of Epiphany and the Season of Lent. You may have noticed that we try to follow the Christian liturgical year in this church, a year which begins on the first Sunday of Advent, the New Year in the Christian church. The story of Advent is a story about the origins of the world and the birth stories of the Messiah which lead into the Season of Epiphany. Epiphany begins with the story of the Baptism of Jesus, where we heard the words, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In the Sundays between that Sunday and now, we have heard stories revealing the identity of Jesus. We have explored various epiphanies or revelations of who Jesus is, for those among whom he ministered, and also, ultimately, who he is for us.

Today, Transfiguration Sunday, is a mountaintop epiphany, the epiphany of epiphanies, about Jesus' identity. It is from this mountaintop that we then go down into Lent and through Lent to Jerusalem, through Holy Week and to Good Friday and the crucifixion. And then, only after having witnessed the event of the cross, the resurrection.

So, today we're on the mountaintop, and we have heard the story of the transfiguration from the point of view of Mark. In June, we will have our third James W. White endowed lectureship and our lecturer will be Amy-Jill Levine. Professor at the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, Levine is an Orthodox Jew who is an expert on the New Testament. One particular mark of her scholarship, you can imagine, is to show how important the Jewishness of Jesus is. She uses a word from literary studies called a "trope" to describe what it is that the Gospel writers are trying to do when they tell a story like Mark's story of the transfiguration. Mark is trying to get those early hearers and readers of his story to think immediately... Mount Sinai. Moses on Mount Sinai receives the Commandments from God. It is not at all a subtle trope if you understand some of the connections.

In Exodus 24, when Moses goes up the mountain, he brings three companions. While on the mountain, a cloud comes down and obscures everything around. The detail of the white clothing, if connected to Exodus, has to do with the shine on Moses face when he comes down the mountain. Probably more likely, it comes from a court scene in the Book of Daniel, where there appears among them a heavenly visitor in bright, light-filled clothing.

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The transfiguration story depicts one of those experiences, one of those mountaintop experiences for which words ultimately fall short. We see this and painfully experience it through Peter, who is all too often the exact reflection of our own reactions to any number of things we encounter in the Gospels.

Here is Peter. He's with James and John, and Jesus is transfigured before them. His clothes become, consider this detail, whiter than even a fuller, or somebody who dealt in bleaching clothing, could make them. In other words, the whiteness was so white, it was supernatural. There was a glow to everything about him, including his clothes.

Amid the supernatural details, there's a strand a human comedy in this scene, like there is in so many of the Gospel stories. Peter and the other two disciples do not know what in the world they are seeing nor what to do. I imagine them looking around, clueless, not having the slightest idea what is going on.

Peter, against his better judgment, makes the big mistake of talking and of trying to come up with some solution, some plan. He says, "Hey, you know what, I'm going to build some structures here – tents or booths. The suggestion may have been related to the Jewish Festival of Booths, or Sukkoth. "I'm going to build some booths here so that you and these two other prophets, Moses and Elijah, can have a place where you can, you know – do what?" He hasn't really thought the plan through to the end.

Then Mark includes a wonderful detail after Peter makes this brilliant suggestion. Mark points out that Peter said this because he didn't know what to say. He put his foot in his mouth. When he would have best stayed silent, he tried to come up with a plan – tried to box up the experience, tried to memorialize the event.

I don't know about you, but I can relate to this. I have a mountaintop experience, some revelation, some epiphany, and I want it to last forever. I try to figure out can prolong it or recreate it. Instead, a cloud descends. I imagine it as one of those gray clouds that drizzles to the point that it's almost raining, a cloud in which you can barely see figures that are ten feet in front of you. Just like on Sinai, a cloud descends, and then a voice comes from the cloud, a divine voice that says, "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to Him." Baptism: "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased," Transfiguration: "This is my son, the beloved, listen to Him."

Listen to what?, you might ask. Just a few verses before, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They give some answers, including, "They think that you might be Elijah, the one to usher in the Messiah." And Jesus says, "But who do you say I am?" And Peter replies, "Well, you're the Messiah."

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Jesus begins talking about his need to go to Jerusalem to be crucified in order to be glorified. Well, that's too much for Peter. "No, no, no, no, no, no. I've got a better plan, and the dying thing is not part of it." To which Jesus responds, "Get behind me Satan." Whoa. "Get behind me Satan?" Strong words for a good friend, but Jesus needs to make a point. Peter's view of what must happen is too limited. Peter wants to box things up nicely, to make them safe, to come up with a reasonable plan.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I have been discerning something new in my own life and in our culture. Over the last few years, but even more specifically since the last election, I've discerned a blurring of the cultural boundaries, the lines which we have drawn between ourselves and others. These barriers we once thought to be sturdy are starting to shake a little bit. Meanwhile, more and more opportunities are becoming available to us to cross those divides.

A few years ago I was invited by Kelly Williams, pastor of Vanguard Church, to join a group of Christian pastors called "The MERGE." I don't know if it's an acronym. It's a postmodern name - The MERGE, a coming together. And when he invited me he said, "The purpose of this group is to come together as pastors, not to talk about doctrine, not to talk shop, and not to debate theology. The purpose of the group is to build relationship." Whenever we come together, one or more people respond to this question: "What is a place of deep pain in your life, and how is God redeeming you?"

Last month, I was asked to be a responder to that question at a retreat at Glen Eyrie. 15 - 20 of pastors gathered, pastors whom I would describe as "Evangelical." This was a new experience for me. Simply put, I was uncomfortable. I don't tend to label myself as evangelical. It would take a long treatise for me describe in what sense I was evangelical. I think of myself in other terms, as a mainline Christian, a liberal Christian, an ecumenical Christian. Those are titles I feel comfortable with. But I was open to this experience because I had received a gracious invitation - an invitation to come as I was. So I put that invitation to the test.

Before I spoke, two pastors shared their response to the question, "What is a point of deep pain in your life, and how is God redeeming you?" As they spoke, I felt my hard, icy heart start to melt and crack open. As I listened to these pastors speak, I had a revelation, astounding in its simplicity: evangelical pastors are people. They are people that hurt and struggle and question and doubt. They don't simply toe the line of doctrine like I had for so long assumed they did. They don't simply inhabit a predictable political box. These were people in all of their messiness and wonderful creativity, and my compassion for them started to flow.

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When it was my chance to share, I stood and said, “I’m not sure I belong here. I honestly don’t. This is new for me to stand in front of you and to share my story. I feel like a stranger. But I think part of my job is to make myself less strange to you.” So I took out pictures of my kids and my wife. I said, “This is my life. This is a very important part of who I am.”

And then I shared about my background, about how my grandparents met at Chicago Theological Seminary, about how my grandfather was a career pastor, mostly in New England, and that my grandmother was a pioneer in the liturgical dance movement in the middle part of the last century. I talked about how my father is a pastor, and my uncle is a pastor, and my mother works as a commissioned pastor at the conference setting of the church. I was trying to convey that I come by this honestly, and I’m rooted in the church. I couldn’t not be Christian if I tried. It’s just shot through who I am.

And then I shared about our church, and I held nothing back. I talked about our Open and Affirming designation, what it says and what it means for us. I described our congregation as a place where people of many different family types - singles, straight couples, gay couples, parents, multiple generations - sit without fear of being judged for who they are in their relationships, and I celebrated that as part of our church’s identity.

I talked about our commitment to social justice. I talked about my own work around issues of reproductive rights and conversations about race. I sensed, at certain points in my sharing, that not everybody was right there with me, agreeing every time I shared a particular view. But all of them received my testimony. Then I shared with them the story I won’t share with you, because in that size of group, we had built relationships within which I could be vulnerable and share that place of deep pain in my life and how God is redeeming me.

When I finished, I said, “I think what God is most trying to get me to do is to surrender. Surrender to God. And in the spirit of surrender, I need to ask all of you for your forgiveness, because I have judged you again and again and again in my heart and with my words. I have upheld and justified my own ego, my own identity by saying, ‘I’m not like one of you.’ And I’m realizing now, as we share back and forth, that we’re all one in Christ. And if Christ is our highest commitment, then every other disagreement or difference is penultimate and can be dealt with under the framework of all belonging together in Christ. So I need to ask your forgiveness.”

And then there was a long, quiet pause, because I didn’t know what to say next. And then, after an interminable about twenty seconds, Kelly Williams said, “Brother, we forgive you.” And I tell you, the feeling that washed over me and what it meant to me was incredible.

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Then somebody in the back of the room spoke up, “I need to ask for your forgiveness and that of your congregation. The first time I heard “Open and Affirming” was about seven or eight years ago, and I remember thinking ‘Ugh, what is that all about?’ This time, when you said ‘Open and Affirming,’ I found myself cheering.” I didn’t know what else to do, so I just walked back to him, and I said, “I don’t know if it’s mine to give, but I’ll be the vessel for God’s forgiveness,” and I gave him a big hug.

This kind of thing is happening in our world. It’s being let loose, and we’re being called to Un-Box Jesus, to let go of some assumptions we’ve had about his identity and, by extension, about our own identity as Christians, and to start unleashing that kind of generosity, that kind of love, that kind of grace upon the world.

Last night, at the gala for the NAACP centennial, I just recalled in that setting the words of James Baldwin, the African American gay author. He once wrote, “If I am not who you say I am, then you are not who you say you are.” I think he was observing that we depend upon our adversaries to bolster and to justify our own identity and our own ego.

I was in a coffee shop a few years ago and struck up a conversation with the person at the counter. She found out that I was a minister and asked which church. I told her. She asked, “What kind of church is that?” I said, “It’s a progressive church.” And she said, “Oh, like New Life?” I was like, “No!” We get to have the “progressive” word. We get to be the progressive ones.

You see, when we call ourselves progressive, we’re saying someone else is regressive or oppressive, and it makes us feel good, like somehow we’re the ones on the march, and we’re leaving everybody in the dust. This journey of reaching beyond our ego boundaries and of making friends with our enemies, of ceasing to rely upon our definition of our adversary in order to justify our own goodness is going to be hard. It’s going to be very uncomfortable. We could go so far as to say, “We will need to suffer.” It will be that hard.

Yet this is exactly the path that Jesus took from that mountain to Jerusalem. The Satan to whom he referred is sometimes called “the adversary,” the one who insists that the only way we can feel good about ourselves is to identify an enemy to demonize. “Define and dehumanize your enemy and you’ll be okay,” Satan says.

Jesus came down from the mountain and went straight to Jerusalem, straight into the face, into the hands, into the courts, into the theology of his enemies, and he *loved* them. He loved them to the point of dying on the cross. That’s what our Lenten journey is. Jesus also said, “You need to deny yourself and

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bear the cross, for whoever does not lose their life will not gain it.” There is no harder work. This suffering is our task, we who are one in Christ with so many, perhaps one in Christ with the whole world.

The one who shone on that mountain now shines in our lives and his love cannot be contained. We must let it overflow in everything we do. So start looking for the openings. Especially if you ask for them, they will be there. Sometimes in small ways, and sometimes in major ways, bear your cross, the cross of Christ, which he took all the way to Jerusalem as a sign of his love for us and deep love for every one of his, an our, enemies. Amen.