Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Transfiguration Sunday

February 11, 2018

Neal MacPherson

LISTENING TO JESUS Exodus 24:12–18

Mark 9:2–9

For years now, I have viewed the story of the Transfiguration as a Resurrection story that the Gospel writers use early on in their Gospels in order to assure us that in the end all will turn out well with Jesus. In the presence of Peter and James and John, Jesus is transfigured and his clothes become dazzling white. It sounds like a resurrection story to us. Perhaps Mark and Matthew and Luke, the gospel writers, want us re-assure us that even though Jesus must journey to a cross, in the end that cross will give way to newness of life. It is as if Jesus in the end will appear transfigured and clothed in white.

Perhaps this is a good interpretation of the story, but there may be another way to look at the story. And this other way is what I would like to explore with you this morning.

This other way of looking at the story begins with those dazzling white clothes. The New Testament scholar, Ched Meyers, reminds us in the early days of Christianity, white came to symbolize the clothing of martyrs. God clothes in white those who have suffered and died for the faith. If this is the case, then the new white garment of Jesus may be symbolic of a martyr’s white robes.[[1]](#footnote-1) To see Jesus as a martyr makes sense when we consider what takes place before and after the Transfiguration. Just before Jesus takes Peter and James and John up the mountain, Jesus announces his impending death to them. We read:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man

must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by

the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and

be killed, and after three days rise again. He said

all this quite openly. (Mark 8:31–2)

Peter will have none of it. How can the Messiah suffer? He rebukes Jesus, but then Jesus rebukes him. Jesus then makes a pronouncement not only to the disciples but to the crowd that was following him: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who wish to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34). Six days after saying these things, Jesus and Peter and James and John go up the mountain. Then, after they come down from the mountain, Jesus again speaks to his disciples and tells them that he is going to be betrayed and then killed, and only after that rise again. They still do not understand.

So the story of the transfiguration is sandwiched between Jesus’s predictions of his own death. The transfiguration itself may be a sign that Jesus will himself be martyred. God will clothe him in the white garment of martyrdom.

Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the first and foremost of the prophets, appear with Jesus. They too have had mountain top experiences at crucial points of discouragement in their missions. Moses goes up on Mount Sinai twice just when the people of Israel are beginning to question his leadership. And Elijah flees to Mount Horeb as King Ahab and his wife Jezebel are pursuing him. Jesus, who must journey towards a cross, finds himself in good company. All three know what it is like to be discouraged. Moses and Elijah disappear from the scene. It is as if Jesus now embodies all that they stood for.

As for Peter, James and John, they still cannot bring themselves to understand. They cannot get their heads around the notion of a suffering Messiah. That’s why Peter wants to make three shelters there on the mountain, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. He wants to preserve this mountaintop experience forever, but he cannot. For Jesus must go down from the mountain and journey to Jerusalem. But, first, the disciples hear a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” The first of these words were already heard at the Baptism of Jesus: “You are my Son the Beloved.” But now there is something added: “Listen to him.” “Listen to him.” Listen to him when he tells you that he is going to be killed. Listen to him when he describes the way of the cross. Listen to him. Do not just hear what he says. Listen to what he says from the depth of your being.

There is a difference between hearing and listening. To hear is just to hear, but to listen is to hear with comprehension.

Listen to Jesus—this is what we are to do. We are to listen to what he says even when we don’t want to. For who wants to hear of a Savior who must journey to a cross? We want things to be positive. We want everything to be bright and cheerful. We want to hear of success. We want to hear that all those young people are going to return to church. We want all those boy scouts who were here last Sunday to be here every Sunday. We want this place to be filled with people. These may be worthy desires, but the temptation may be to soft-peddle any talk of a cross. Our officially optimistic society does not want to hear any talk of suffering and death. It’s such a downer. So it’s best to avoid any mention of suffering.

But, my friends, you and I know that we cannot help but mention the reality of suffering in our lives and in the life of the world. The truth of the Gospel is not to be discovered in the old cowboy song:

*Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam,*

*where the deer and the antelope play,*

*where never is heard a discouraging word,*

*and the skies are not cloudy all day.*

Such a suffering-free world and a suffering-free Messiah and a suffering-free Gospel might satisfy our needs for the short term but not for the long term, for suffering is a part of life, and we need a Gospel and a Savior to relate to the whole of our lives and not to just a portion of our lives.

We cannot get through life without suffering, and the older we get the more we know of the dark valleys through which we must journey. Some of our suffering cannot be helped. It just happens. Some of our suffering we choose, especially when we speak and act from the standpoint of the Gospel in a world that does not share its truths.

I believe that in times of our own suffering it helps to know that Jesus also suffered. There is nothing in our human experience that he did not himself experience. He is truly our human representative in the presence of God. But he is also divine. In him God also dwells. In his suffering God also suffers. By way of the cross, we learn that God is a God who enters into the suffering of the world and also suffers with us in our own suffering, and because it is God who suffers with us, we are granted the gift of hope and newness of life even as we go through the valleys of the shadow of death.

“This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” We can do nothing better than to listen to Jesus from the depths of our being. We listen to him: he is going to come down from the mountain and journey to Jerusalem and the cross. He speaks and calls us to journey with him, promising only that as we join him on the way, God will be with us and for us. We could ask for nothing more. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man* (New York: Orbis Books,1988) 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)