

Staying in the Present  
2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9  
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On a previous Transfiguration Sunday, I offered you the following idea for your reflection about a Christian conception of time: I said, “Honor the past but don’t live in it. Enjoy the present but don’t think that’s all there is. Hope in the future because that is where God is leading you.” I still believe that to be true, but tonight I want to encourage you to “enjoy the present” perhaps more than I had in mind the last time we visited with Peter, James, and John on the mountaintop. That’s not because Fat Tuesday, and Carnival are coming soon, but because I think that in Jesus’ telling the disciples to “tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead,” he is giving them wise counsel to not move on too quickly from the presence of the glory of God.

The story of the trip up a high mountain by Jesus and three of his disciples, the story we call the Transfiguration, is one which truly sheds light, if you will pardon the pun, on the Biblical conception of time. We have the past represented by the ancestors in the faith, Moses and Elijah. We have the future represented by Jesus’ prediction of his death, in the passages both immediately preceding and following this episode. And we have the present, represented by the shining Christ and the imperative voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” Every element is important for our understanding of who Jesus is: someone

who speaks with both the dead and the living from the past -- Moses, who died before entering the promised land, but also Elijah, who though he was taken up to heaven, did not die, as we heard in the story from Second Kings; someone for whom a future of death does not mean the end of life; and someone who, in the present, shows us the very character of God. This is the Jesus the Gospel wants to show us as we read again this story.

The disciples may be forgiven for not having connected all these dots in the midst of their experience on the mountaintop. It was a lot to deal with after a long and difficult hike. It is not everyday you see the past, present, and future coming together like they did. And so it was, I think, a gift of Jesus' wisdom to these three frightened disciples that he warned them to stay silent, not only because to tell this story might have led them into all kinds of trouble, but also because he knows that what they experienced up there was so powerful that that they ran the risk of losing it altogether by telling the story too soon. You see, we human beings too often want to rush on to the next thing, the next high, the next adventure, and miss out on the experience we've just had. Or we can't move on past the beautiful thing we have experienced, and we get stuck trying to repeat it or find it again. Sometimes, even in the midst of it, we are already thinking ahead to how we will use that experience to further our careers, or our relationships and in so doing, lose out on the holy or glorious moment because we are always planning ahead, rather than just enjoying it. But what is the chief end of man, as the Westminster catechism

helps us to remember? “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Indeed, the glory of God is to be enjoyed, as overwhelming and terrifying as it may sometimes be.

And so Jesus wants to help the disciples stay in the present, even if but for a little while longer, to enjoy the God they have just experienced in such an amazing way. And they will need the encouragement to do so, since their experience was so awesome. Mark tells us that Peter “did not know what to say, for they were terrified,” and that his response was to build some dwellings instead of simply soaking it all in. Because what do we do when we get freaked out? We act impulsively, or irrationally, or involuntarily. Or we get paralyzed. But we seldom get the most of the experience when that happens. We seldom heed the wisdom that in case someone is having a heart attack, take your own pulse first. We seldom stay in the present despite the rewards it brings. We seldom have the stamina of Elisha who kept his eyes on the prize and experienced a double portion of the Elijah’s blessing, despite the grief of losing his friend and mentor.

If you aren’t yet convinced of our inability, perhaps I can remind you of the wisdom that most of the gentlemen in the room will have heard, and probably recklessly disregarded, concerning how to relate to the women in our lives. It is said that when a woman comes to you troubled, the last thing she wants from you is advice, yet that is usually what we have to offer. In these situations, so I am told, women don’t want you to tell them how to fix the situation; they just need you to listen. Emotionally fragile beings that we men are, we can’t bear to see someone

suffering and so we want to take all the hurt away by solving whatever problem may be provoking the sorrow in our beloved's life. And indeed, by rushing in to do so, we have only exacerbated the problem for our loved ones, and for ourselves, because we have not been able to stay in the moment, and allow the emotional fever to run its course. And so what begins as a moment full of possibilities for the healing of grief often turns into another skirmish in the so-called battle of the sexes. Or so I am told...

But staying in the present, and enjoying its fruits, is possible. Perhaps some of you have participated in conversations modeled after the way certain Native American and African traditions use to guide decision making in community. The elders gather in a circle, a shape used to denote the equality of its members. The purpose of the circle is not to debate the pros and cons of the issue at hand, or to convince others of the rightness of their position, but rather to give everyone an opportunity to be heard and to share their thoughts on the matter, until the community comes to a common mind. Sometimes these circle conversations last for days, and with long periods of silence, until that consensus is reached. It can be a long and hard process, but it is one in which the discomfort of the situation is not allowed to produce hasty actions which will bring dis-ease to the community. One of the central, and most difficult, principles of circle conversations is that as each person is speaking, the others in the circle are not only not allowed to respond, whether interrupting or affirming, but also that they are to be listening so intently

to what the other person is saying, that they are not even able to form a response. In practice, this might mean a long silence between two speakers, and the next person needs time to formulate his or her thoughts, but the holy moments created by that silence are worth the wait. I can tell you from my own experience working with teenagers, that even among a group often hesitant to speak about themselves in front of relative strangers, that the circle conversation helped them stay in the moment long enough for real community and grace to emerge.

Just around the corner of course, next Sunday, in fact, is the season of Lent, the time of the year before Easter when we turn our attention towards some of the more uncomfortable aspects of our lives, when we dwell a little more intentionally on the parts of ourselves which don't match the glory the disciples witnessed on the mountaintop. Lent is the season we focus on repentance as we hear again about the sin that led Jesus to the cross, and the sin that sent the disciples fleeing from it. Except for the most psychologically masochistic among us, reflecting on our failures, and trying to make amends, is one of the most emotionally painful exercises a Christian can undertake. We must confront our unmet expectations, our underlying moral deficits, and our misunderstood intentions. Repentance, if we do it right, is a very uncomfortable place to be, for it requires us to hold ourselves up to the standard of the life of Jesus Christ, however unfair that may seem, unfair because who can ever measure up? Maybe it is like being on the mountaintop with three of the greatest saints God ever shared with us, beholding a light so intense it

can only mean the very presence of God, and then being plunged into a darkness that overshadows and overwhelms us with terror. And who wouldn't want to run screaming from all that, or at least occupy oneself with an activity which would take one's mind off the intensity of it all? Yes, repentance is an uncomfortable place to be, almost as uncomfortable as the very glory of God.

And yet, to stay with that moment, as powerfully uncomfortable as it may be, is where grace and healing are found. The Psalmist reminds us to "Sing praises to the Lord, O you faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning." To skip from joy to joy may be the object of our spiritual fantasies, but it doesn't reflect our spiritual realities. You see, somewhere between dusk and dawn on the mountaintop, sometime before the weeping ends, we hear the words we long to hear: that joy does come in the morning, that not only is Jesus God's beloved child, but that you are too, and then suddenly the fears that surrounded you are gone, and all that remains is the face and person of Jesus Christ, and the promise of a new day, and favor that lasts a lifetime. But you have to be there. You have to stay there. You have to resist the temptation to linger in the past, or try to jump ahead into the future. You have to stay in the present.

Let me suggest, as I always do before Lent, that you seriously consider undertaking a Lenten discipline, perhaps giving up something as a fast, perhaps taking on something new and healthy in your life, but to do a disciplined

something which mirrors the very meaning of the word *repentance*: “to turn around.” But on this Transfiguration Sunday, let me also suggest that as you undertake that discipline, make sure you take time each day to stay in the present, to connect the dots, so to speak, between your discipline and the reason for doing it. Make it a daily habit to be, and stay, uncomfortable in the midst of your fasting, so that the discipline may actually have a shot at doing what it is supposed to do, to enable you to glorify God and enjoy him forever. May your Lenten disciplines be a blessing to you, and to us all, as we stay in the present with the help of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.