

Sermon for 7:30am February 11: Transfiguration

Mark 9: 2 – 9

The Rev. Jemma Allen

As many of you know we have two dogs: Maisy and Charlie. They are expert readers of cues and clues. They can tell our car apart from every other car in our street and ready themselves with great anticipation to welcome Andrew home. Maisy can hear the rattle of the kibble bucket from the other end of the house and knows it will soon be dinner time. She has a special happy dance that she reserves for the appearance of food.

To understand this morning's Gospel we need to read the cues and clues too.

The first clue is the first few words of the Gospel passage. It is easy to overlook as slightly irrelevant, but it is pointing us to another story. *Six days later.*

After six days Jesus is ascending a mountain with his companions.

Something significant is bound to happen

– this beginning recalls for the listener

Moses' ascent of Sinai with Joshua in Exodus 24, where the cloud covered the mountain for six days.

We might expect something important to happen, some revelation

like when Moses received what we now call the Ten Commandments at Sinai.

In fact, just ascending a mountain would raise expectations for the hearers of this story.

Tradition and culture makes for a firm expectation:

mountains are the place to encounter God.

Jesus is changed before their eyes and his clothes become glistening white.

While such splendour indicates belonging to the heavenly world, the transformation of a normal physical body into a spiritual body

was part of the hope of the future resurrection.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians,

We shall all be transformed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Paul is picturing what will happen to those who remain alive at the second coming of Jesus.

In the story of the transfiguration this is already seen as happening for Jesus, even if temporarily.

We are being given a preview of the climax of history.

In this transformation we are being told that Jesus is of heaven and that he belongs to a future of hope.

In the book of Malachi

the expectation that Elijah would come at the climax of history is spelled out.

This hope reappears during the crucifixion where people think Jesus' cry is for Elijah (15:35).

There was also a common expectation, based on Deuteronomy 18:15-18 that in the last days a prophet like Moses would appear.

The words of Deuteronomy 18:18, *'Listen to him!'* are picked up in the voice from heaven.

So all these things together create a great sense of expectation in the reader or hearer of the account, and in the disciples who are with Jesus.

And not surprisingly Peter wants to hold on to this amazing moment, full of hope and expectation.

Peter's suggestion that tents be erected for the three persons probably reflects the practice of the Feast of the Tabernacles when men and their sons spent time in such temporary huts in a reminder of the time Israel spent in the wilderness.

For some Jews there was an expectation, based on a passage in the Book of Zechariah, that the Day of the Lord would be ushered in during the Feast of Booths. So Peter is trying to make things right for this new age to dawn.

And then we hear the voice from heaven, *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*

This voice echoes the voice at the baptism of Jesus, in speaking of Jesus as God's beloved son (1:11).

It is spoken here to the disciples; there it was addressed to Jesus, himself. The effect is to remind us of who Jesus is.

The story of transfiguration then, is full of cues and clues about what is happening who Jesus is and how it might all make sense.

At the 9:30am service today we will baptise two boys:

Samuel who is a few months old, and Filip who is 6.

And baptism is full of cues and clues about what it means and about what it is for us to live in to the identity given to us in our baptism.

We use water.

We use water because it reminds us that God was at the very beginning of the world, indeed before the beginning of the world, just as God was at the very beginning of Filip and Samuel's life, a life that developed and grew surrounded by the water in the womb.

We use water to remind us of the flood, of God's promise to Noah that God would find a new way to restore relationship with humans.

We remember Moses leading the Hebrew people through the Red Sea from slavery to Egypt to freedom in the promised land (even though it took 40 years).

We get clues then in the use of water in baptism that this is about God's presence with us, about God's promise to us, about freedom from slavery to sin and death.

We use oil too in baptism, oil because through Scripture it is a sign of blessing and of identity – oil is used to commission people into a new role, particularly as priests or Kings.

In baptism we declare that Samuel and Filip are God's beloved children and so we mark them with oil and claim them as Christ's own.

The same happened for you when you were baptised.

So there are clues for us in Scripture and in liturgy and just as we looked at the very first phrase in today's Gospel passage:

Six days later,

so I want to look at the very last sentence in the passage:

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Jesus and the disciples didn't stay on the mountaintop.

He came down, all the way down.

And in that sentence we hear what is coming for Jesus: a brutal death on the cross.

Being God's beloved Son,

shining with the glory of God,
didn't save Jesus from suffering
It points us to the hope of resurrection
but transfiguration didn't stop him suffering
a miserable death on the cross.

I hope that there is no miserable death for Samuel or for Filip.
But baptism and the declaration that each of us
is the beloved child of God,
marked as Christ's own for ever,
is no guarantee of an easy life.
There is no insurance card
or bulletproof shield
conferred in baptism.
We can't save Samuel and Filip from the difficult things that happen to humans:
sickness
heartbreak
grief

But we know something else is always already true.
We know that God delights in them
promises to be with them
and holds out to them and to us the hope of resurrection.

Andrew is often heard to say that the death
conquered in Christ's death and resurrection
is not just physical death
but all the deaths we experience in life:
the death of love,
the death of dreams,
the death of those we love.
In all of those circumstances
we have the comfort of knowing that our God has suffered with us and for us
that God is with us
and there is hope, hope of resurrection
of new life and new possibility.

The Son of Man rose from the dead.
Thanks be to God.

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