

Hidden Treasure

In the calendar of the church year the Sunday just before Lent begins is known as Transfiguration Sunday. On this day we traditionally read from one of the gospels the story of Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up on a mountain where they get a private glimpse of Jesus in his glory. This unusual event comes at a major turning point in the gospel story. In the eighth chapter of Mark, after the disciples have been following Jesus for some time, he turns to them and asks a provocative question: "Who do people say I am?" They report to him what they've been hearing out there among the crowds: people think that Jesus is another John the Baptist, or a new Elijah, or that he's like one of the legendary prophets of the Bible. And then he asks them an even more provocative question: "Who do you say I am?" Peter, acting as spokesman for the group, as he does so often, answers, "You are the Messiah." But if this is supposed to be a triumphant moment, Jesus immediately lets all the wind out their sails. Because instead of congratulating Peter for getting the right answer, Jesus begins to tell the disciples that his destiny as the Messiah is to suffer, and die, and ultimately to rise again.

And so now, as Jesus begins his journey toward the cross, the Father grants him a brief foretaste of the heavenly glory that lies beyond the rejection and abuse and suffering that waited for him in Jerusalem. And God allows the disciples, whose own faith would be tested to the limits, to witness this moment, too. In their darkest

moments they will be able to look back at this experience and find God's assurance that despite everything that will happen God knows what he's doing, that Jesus is his beloved Son.

At the level of our own lives, we can probably identify with what happens here. We all have moments when need that witness of the Holy Spirit that we're really on the right path and that there is something better waiting for us beyond the struggles we're going through. The end of my first semester in seminary was a time like that. As with all moves to a new place it was full of challenges. And we had begun with a bonus of pressure because Lorri had had emergency surgery just as we were packing up to leave Buffalo. But we had gone off to Princeton in faith that the Lord would provide the money to pay the bills, and God had provided. Along with carrying a full course load, with all the challenges, both intellectual and spiritual, that come with being a first semester seminary student, I was teaching math two evenings a week at a community college. Meanwhile Lorri had found a good, but very high-stress, office job at Princeton University, which thankfully came with medical benefits. And Anne, who was 2 at the time, was spending her days in daycare. It was all we could do to keep our heads above water, but we were making it. But then we went for our first visit to the dentist in Princeton and discovered that Lorri would need a root canal—just the straw to break the back of our fragile family budget. If it wasn't for some assurance that we following God's call it would have been easy to dust off our New York State teaching certificates and head for home.

That assurance obviously came or we wouldn't be here, and I'll come back to that later. But for now I'd like to go in a slightly different direction. As I've been

thinking about this story all week, I keep on finding myself coming back to what happens at the very end. After this wonderfully powerful and reassuring experience on the mountain top, Mark writes, “Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

This isn't the only time something like this happens in the Gospel of Mark. In fact, it's a recurring theme. By my count, this is something like the ninth time in Mark that Jesus has told someone to keep quiet about him. But why all the secrecy? Why keep such wonderful news quiet?

This is something that has puzzled readers of Mark for ages, so I'm not promising to solve it this morning. I would, however, like to put forward a hypothesis. I think that at least part of what may have been involved was, to put it in very modern terms, that Jesus wanted to stay in control his own mission and his own message. I don't mean this in the way we might associate with the political campaigns we're witnessing right now. To borrow from Paul's description of his own ministry in the other reading this morning, there's no reason to think that Jesus had anything shameful to hide, or that he was trying to “spin” his message to make himself more popular. It was more a matter of people being so quick to misunderstand who he was and what he had come to do.

Now, of the instances I can find in the first eight chapters of Mark where Jesus tells someone to be quiet, roughly half of them come after he has healed someone. As we saw in the story last week, reports about Jesus' healings attracted such large crowds that it became impossible for him to go into the villages and preach in the synagogues. But Jesus came to be far more than a healer or miracle worker. As I

hope you will remember, the very first thing we read in Mark about Jesus' mission was that he went out into Galilee proclaiming a message, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The healings were a sign that kingdom of God is near, but people also needed to hear the message, something that became hard to do when people were constantly seeking healing.

The second reason why Jesus silenced people was because there were so many misunderstandings about who he was. We just saw that when Jesus asked the disciples who people thought he was, the popular opinions all missed the mark. But even when Peter gets it right there in chapter 8, when he announced that Jesus was the Messiah, the very next thing Mark says is that "Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." Although Peter might have believed that Jesus was the Messiah—at that point he didn't really understand what that meant. The title "Messiah" meant a lot of different things to different people in Jesus' time—an apocalyptic warrior descending from heaven, or a revolutionary freedom fighter, or a teacher who would go off into the desert to form a new Israel. There were so many distorted ideas about the Messiah out there, that Jesus thought it better that no one call him that. And a major part of what happens in the second half of Mark is the process of the disciples coming to understand that Jesus would accomplish his mission by suffering, and being killed, and rising again.

And that at last brings us full circle to why Jesus silences Peter, James, and John on their way down the mountain. Because people can have misunderstandings about how God reveals his glory, too. We have a tendency to associate it with Moses

at the burning bush, or the parting of the Red Sea, or Jesus being transfigured and glowing in the dark. But those special revelations came at crucial moments in world-changing events. But most of the time we live down at the bottom of the mountain and we see God's glory revealed in much quieter ways.

To return to my story from earlier, the assurance that we were on the right path in Princeton came through a series of little things. We had had dinner with the pastor of the church we were attending just about this time, and he was aware of our situation. And then one evening he arrived at our door with a check from the board of deacons—not enough to pay the whole dental bill, but enough to make a real difference. And more than that, it was a sign of God's care and concern for us. The other piece was even less glamorous. I visited the financial aid office at the seminary and learned that the PC(USA) had a program that made small loans to seminary students. We borrowed a thousand dollars, I think, to help pay that bill, and that was all debt we ever incurred during my years in seminary.

Life-changing revelations of God's grace and power come most often through ordinary Christians doing extraordinary things. Whenever I get a chance to see the NFL's Baltimore Ravens play on TV, I always keep my eye out for number 74, Michael Oher, who plays offensive tackle. People know Michael because a man who was writing a book about offensive tackles stumbled onto his story, which he turned into a best-selling book, which later became an Academy Award winning movie. Michael, who is African-American, was born into poverty in a chaotic family, and was pretty much living hand-to-mouth on his own when he met up with the Tuohy family, who were wealthy and white, and Christian. They took him into their own home, got

him into a good school where his athletic talents blossomed, and became his adopted family. That was just a beginning of a series of very ordinary things that people did for Michael that added up to something very extraordinary and changed the direction of his life.

I know that Christians do that sort of thing countless times every day. In fact, I believe that we all have the potential to do this if we listen to God and are willing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Practically every day there are opportunities to say something or do something that may not seem like a big thing to us, but will reveal God's power and love to someone. It's as people see Christians living lives of self-sacrificing love that they will understand who Jesus is. They will see that God comes to us not in glorious revelations on mountaintops, but that he came into the world through his Son who valued our lives in this world, and shared life's struggles with us, and who overcame this world through his death on the cross and his resurrection on Easter. Now that's glory! Thanks be to God! Amen.

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