

## Group Portraits

Mark 9:2-10 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Precisely one year ago to this day, just shy of a couple of dozen Holy Land pilgrims from this church and a couple of Connecticut congregations, were setting foot on American soil again. Nearly every one of us carried the same souvenir carefully packed away in our luggage. It was a group picture of us all taken in the city of Jerusalem. The panoramic view of Jerusalem in the background lent an unmistakable context to the occasion of our being together.

Some of the most memorable occasions of our lives tend to be recorded in photo opportunities like this, aren't they? We especially take lots of pictures at our big family events: graduations, birthday parties, anniversaries, and the like. Such photo ops forever link us to others in the picture, who were drawn to the moment by our relationship to them and the purpose that bonded us together for that moment in time. As a minister, I've lost count of how many family portraits I've been a part of because of my role as officiant at a wedding or a baptism.

Today's Gospel reading from the Gospel of Mark is like one of those photo ops. Not, of course, taken with a camera and flash; but captured in words with a cinematic pop to them. You might say that Mark is the photographer who captures the moment for us. The setting is a mountain in northern Palestine. And the occasion — the big event where the picture was taken — is the Transfiguration of Jesus. The whole point of the Transfiguration story is to remove any trace of doubt that people in Mark's day might have had about Jesus being anything less than the divine Son of God.

You might wonder how much convincing was really necessary. After all, by this point in Jesus' ministry the disciples — and many others — had already witnessed Jesus healing people and casting demons out of them. He had walked on water and calmed a storm at sea. He had fed a multitude with little more than table scraps — not just once, but twice. Yet, scattered among these verbal pictures of miraculous signposts pointing to Jesus' divinity, Mark's storytelling eye also captures candid shots of the doubtful and disbelieving. In one place, the local religious leaders credited his miraculous powers to his being possessed by the devil. When he preached in his home town of Nazareth, he was rejected by the people who had been his neighbors since his youth. At one point, his own family members come looking for him, to bring him back home because they were afraid people were beginning to wonder whether he had lost his mind.

Even his disciples never quite know what to make of him. They follow him because they recognize him to be a wise rabbi. They consider the possibility that he might even be a prophet. Or, maybe even a political leader who would throw off the yoke of Roman tyranny and return Israel to her glory days. But beyond that, they're almost as much in the dark as anybody about the true nature of Jesus and the real purpose of his ministry. At best, they get flashes of fleeting insight about him, like when Peter calls him the Messiah. But these glimpses of Jesus' true identity never quite develop fully and their image of him remained blurry.

Then one day, the three disciples who make up Jesus' inner circle are invited to accompany him to a mountaintop. Up there, they get a picture of Jesus for the ages. You could say that the lighting there was

just right. And what a light it was! Jesus' clothes glow with an unearthly brilliance – with a whiteness brighter than they had ever seen.

As with most family photo ops, Jesus is surrounded by other notable personalities. Moses and Elijah are there with Jesus. The significance of the presence of Moses and Elijah is easily overlooked by modern readers. But it would have been perfectly clear to those who heard this story when it was first told. Before his death, Moses told the Israelites to be prepared for a day when God would send to them another prophet like him. A messiah who would deliver them, just as Moses had delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. For his part, Elijah was a prophet who, it was believed, did not die but was taken directly up into heaven. It was also believed that Elijah would one day return to earth to announce the coming of the Messiah. So, the appearance of both Moses and Elijah with Jesus, gave some context by which to understand Jesus to be the Messiah that Moses had predicted, and the the signpost that in Jesus, the messiah had arrived. Kind of like the way a minister's presence in a family photo identifies the occasion as a wedding or a baptism.

There was yet another family member in this mountaintop photo op. One who appeared in a cloud. Not the cloud where we upload our files for sharing on the internet. In the Old Testament, a cloud often signified the presence of God. From this cloud the disciples hear God's voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" The disciples had heard people call Jesus many things before this. Some had called him a rabbi and some, a prophet. But no one had called him God's Son.

There was a lot of confusion about who Jesus was, even among his own disciples. But for these three disciples at least, the confusion was removed on that mountaintop when Jesus was transfigured right before their eyes. Transfiguration literally means to change the *outward* appearance of something in order to better see who they are on the *inside*. Jesus' physical appearance was changed in the Transfiguration. But no less important than the changes to Jesus *outward appearance*, was what it revealed to those disciples about Jesus' *inner identity*.

Long after they had gone from the mountaintop back down to the valley, long after the visions of Moses and Elijah had faded, long after the glowing cloud that spoke with the voice of God had dissipated... their new perception of who Jesus was, and what that meant for them, remained. It could be seen by the ways that their lives took on more and more of a visible resemblance to his. It could be felt by those who heard the gospel they spread after Jesus' death and resurrection and experienced the reality of Jesus for themselves through the witness to what these disciples had seen and heard while with him.

There would still be many misunderstandings, failures and betrayals that lay ahead of them. None of the gospels - and most of all, not Mark's gospel – suggest that the disciples were experts at figuring Jesus out. But having been guests at the Transfiguration told them that they were a part of this family of faith they witnessed on the mountain. And they brought that awareness with them when they went back down the mountain. Because, once you do start to see Jesus in a new light, you start seeing a lot of other things in a new light, also. Beginning with yourself.

Those first disciples were mostly a motley crew of fishermen, tax collectors and zealots. Before Jesus walked into their lives, I don't think they ever, in their wildest dreams, thought that they would be remembered the way we remember them today. Yet, Jesus entrusted them, and not the religious professionals, with carrying on his message and ministry. Seeing Jesus in a new light can help *you* see the world around you in a new light, too. How you see Jesus will influence how you see a great many

other things. It will rearrange your priorities and reshape your values. It will cast social issues in a new light and reconfigure how you interpret what is going on in the world around you. The important thing about the gospel writers preserving the story of Jesus' transfiguration is not to wow us, or puzzle us with a strange story. What's important is that, in preserving their experience of what took place on that mountaintop, they invite us to reflect on our own place in this family portrait.

It was nice to go to Israel and see with our own eyes where Jesus walked. But you don't have to travel half way around the world to be in the picture of what it means to be included in a family portrait of his followers. We are all on our own journeys of transfiguration. As our inward understanding of our relationship to Jesus evolves, our outward actions will reflect the change within us.

As Paul said to the Corinthians, many people's minds are veiled from seeing the glory of God that is revealed in Christ. But as we are transfigured, we might become the means by which the veil is lifted from their understanding. So, that when someone looks at the Church, they will see more than a building. They will see a group portrait that reveals the light and the glory of God that has been revealed for all time, in Jesus.

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