

Nick Earl
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
February 11, 2018
Text: Mark 9.2-9

The Hope of Israel

With the story of the Transfiguration, we have entered a new chapter in Mark's gospel. This Epiphany season we have been on a literal journey with Jesus, from his baptism in the River Jordan by John,¹ to his call of the first disciples,² to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God³ and his demonstration of the way it is in *this* kingdom: where people are exorcized of their demons,⁴ the sick are healed.⁵

Each Sunday, we have been given just a snippet of the gospel. In between these pieces we read on Sundays, more manifestations of the kingdom are revealed: the crippled walk,⁶ lepers are cleansed,⁷ the hungry are fed,⁸ the deaf hear and the mute speak.⁹ Now while these are all miracles in their own right, and while they are signs of the power and authority which Jesus commands, there is also a subtle allusion to the Old Testament prophets, which runs throughout Mark's gospel, and which is named explicitly in today's Transfiguration story.

The author of Mark's gospel is keen to build up a comparison between the deeds of two Hebrew prophets in particular: Moses and Elijah. Moses, because he is the first and principle prophet of Israel, and Elijah, because he is the bold prophet who restores the voice of YHWH to a people who have forgotten their covenant with God.

¹ 1st Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1.4-11

² 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany: John 1.43-51 and 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1.14-20

³ Mark 1.14-15

⁴ 4th Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1.21-28 and Mark 1.32, 39; 5.2-20

⁵ 5th Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1.29-39

⁶ Mark 2.3-12

⁷ Mark 1.40-45

⁸ Mark 6.30-44, 8.1-9

⁹ Mark 7.32-37

Mark's gospel is unapologetic about this comparison between Jesus and the prophets. Moses, of course, led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt;¹⁰ Jesus will lead the New Israel away from bondage to Rome (although not in a way they expect). Moses entreats God to feed the wandering Israelites in the wilderness,¹¹ and Jesus performs feeding miracles¹² in "deserted places" - otherwise translated, "the wilderness."¹³ God's Law is revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai,¹⁴ and Jesus, as we read today, ascends a mountain in order to further reveal the Law, to be revealed, in fact, *as* God's Law: God's own Son, the Beloved Son.

Elijah, on the other hand, is known for standing up to authority, was an "outsider" prophet, rather than one who worked the system from within...in that way, he is much like Jesus! Elijah famously stood up to King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, to prove that YHWH was the true God of Israel.¹⁵ We are told that Elijah spent forty days and nights fasting in the wilderness,¹⁶ waited on by angels, much like Jesus.¹⁷ First Kings also tells us of how Elijah revived a child from death,¹⁸ in a way similar to Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter.¹⁹ And like Moses, Elijah, too, enters God's presence on a mountain.²⁰ These similarities between the prophets Moses and Elijah with Jesus are not coincidental.

Mark's gospel is making the comparison to Moses and Elijah, but in a way which extends Jesus' greatness beyond these two Hebrew powerhouses. Moses and Elijah were privileged, once, to enter

¹⁰ Exodus 3ff

¹¹ Exodus 16, Numbers 11

¹² Mark 6.30-44 and 8.1-9

¹³ *Eremos topos* (Greek), literally, "place of wilderness or desert"

¹⁴ Exodus 19ff and 24ff

¹⁵ 1Kings 19

¹⁶ 1Kings 19.8

¹⁷ Mark 1.12-13

¹⁸ 1Kings 17.17-24

¹⁹ Mark 5.21-43

²⁰ 1Kings 19.11

God's presence on their respective mountains. And now, in the *person* of Jesus, they enter God's presence again. In the Transfiguration Jesus is revealed as the Messiah, the Son of God.

And yet to say that the purpose of the Transfiguration is to reveal Jesus as Messiah, is too simple a point. For one thing, even though this event took place in front of Peter, James and John, they still didn't get it. Peter was clearly confused by the apparition, by the way that he responded,²¹ and as they are all coming down from the mountain, in the verse following where we left off, we are told that they questioned "what this rising from the dead could mean."²² The author of Mark's gospel also didn't include this demonstration for us – the reader's sake – to indicate Jesus' divinity. After all, from the very first verse of the gospel, Mark informs us that this is "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."²³ Talk about a spoiler alert!

So what then? Why is the transfiguration important?

I would suggest that, as we've been talking, the answer lies in the connection between the Old and New Testaments. The Law, symbolized by Moses, and the prophetic voice, represented by Elijah, are fundamentally symbols of the "hope of Israel," to quote Pope Benedict XVI, "the Exodus that brings definitive liberation; but the content of this hope is the suffering Son of Man and Servant of God, who by his suffering opens the door into freedom and renewal."²⁴ The Transfiguration is above all else a symbol of hope, a "dazzling white"²⁵ beacon to the world that God will ultimately liberate and redeem all things, and that redemption will be through the person of Jesus Christ.

²¹ Mark 9.5-6

²² Mark 9.10

²³ Mark 1.1

²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 311.

²⁵ Mark 9.3

In the moment of Jesus' transfiguration, his "clothes became dazzling white,"²⁶ not just as Moses shone when talking to the Lord,²⁷ but white like the color of the vindicated martyrs' robe of Revelation.²⁸ There is no doubt that this new hope, in the form of Jesus, is going to cost him his life.

Which is precisely why the Transfiguration is the last reading we hear each year before entering the season of Lent. It is a literal mountaintop moment, a pause, separating the work Jesus has done so far in revealing the Kingdom of God to the people of Israel, from his Passion by which he is going to secure them their freedom. In some ways, Peter's right. Why not wait here a while?

Why not pause here? Indeed, that's the big cliffhanger that I'm going to leave us with today.

My friends, I invite us to figuratively sit on this mountaintop with Jesus, at least for a couple of days, until we *ALL* come back on Wednesday. Read the first half of the gospel of Mark. Read again the miracles which Jesus performs, the signs of the kingdom as they are revealed to us; the crippled healed, the deaf made to hear, the lepers made clean, the hungry fed, the possessed exorcised of their demons. These are signs of God's kingdom, breaking through, revealed on earth. This is our hope. The hope for a time when all shall be redeemed by God.

There is more to this story of redemption, but for today, as we close out this season, let's just pause and appreciate those glimpses of the kingdom which we see in the world. God *is* with us. God *is* making all things new. Our hope rests on Jesus.

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"²⁹ Alleluia!

²⁶ Mark 9.3

²⁷ Exodus 34

²⁸ Revelation 6.9-11, 7.9, 13-14

²⁹ Mark 9.7