Today, Transfiguration Sunday is the last Sunday in the liturgical season of Epiphany. This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Next Sunday, we will begin our look at Jesus’ preparation and ours for the great central drama of salvation: Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection on Easter morning.

Jesus has already begun to prepare his disciples for the end prior to the transfiguration. That’s what Mark is referring to when he begins this story, “Six days later…” Six days prior to this mountain top story, Jesus had asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter had answered, “You are the Messiah.” Peter got the gold star for that answer but almost immediately went from the penthouse to the doghouse by arguing with Jesus about how Jesus saw the remainder of his ministry playing out. For the first time, Jesus has told them that he will suffer and be rejected and killed and rise from the dead. Not only that, he tells them, but anyone who wants to follow him will have to take up a cross and lose their life for his sake. Pretty sobering stuff; no wonder Peter didn’t like it much. Although Jesus does seem to soften all the bad news by promising that some of them “will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God coming with power.”

So, six days later, Jesus takes the three disciples who have become his inner circle, Peter, James and John, and heads up a mountain. When they get to where they are going, a miracle happens. It’s a pretty impressive miracle, just reading Mark’s stripped down story cold, but even more so if we take some time to look at some of the details that would have seemed obvious to the three disciples and to Mark and his readers but might be a bit obscured for us.

First of all, what’s the significance of Mark’s description of Jesus’ metamorphosis? There’s something here besides Jesus’ robe becoming “whiter than white” in a day before Maytag washers and the 3x stain removal power of Tide, or even good old fashioned Clorox bleach. The fabric of pure white (almost impossible to attain in that time) and bright white light would have been inseparably linked in the disciples’ minds with the presence of God. Encountering this phenomenon on a mountain top, they would have immediately thought of Moses, who went up to the mountain to receive the law from God and came back, Exodus tells us, with his face shining so brightly that the people were afraid and he had to wear a veil whenever he came back from the presence of the Lord. Since Jesus habitually referred to himself as the Son of Man, the disciples may have also been put in mind of the vision of Daniel:

“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow;… and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

Peter, James and John have a vision of Jesus surrounded by the power of God, not unlike Paul’s vision of brightness on the Damascus road, or the way that Paul later writes to Timothy that God “dwell in unapproachable light.” We referred to this vision of the light of God when we sang “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes… Thou reignest in glory; thou dwellest in light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight; all praises we render: O help us to see that only the splendor of light hideth thee.”
As if this sudden and dramatic change in their friend’s appearance wasn’t enough to unnerve the apostles, he is suddenly joined by two figures whom they mysteriously find immediately recognizable: Moses and Elijah. Certainly we recognize these names as two of the great heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures, but we might ask, why these two? Perhaps, in a foreshadowing of Jesus’ resurrection, it is because these two have their own peculiar relationship to death. Elijah, after all, never died, but was swept living off to heaven in a fiery chariot. First-century Judaism also questioned whether Moses had died; the scriptures, after all, said that God had buried him. Could it mean that he, too, had been assumed bodily into heaven? Moses and Elijah would have also been for the disciples the very embodiment of the scriptures; the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elijah. Although Mark does not quote Jesus, as Matthew does, saying that he is come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, the image of Moses and Elijah in conversation with Jesus could certainly elicit the same meaning.

There would have been an even more immediate connection for the disciples between their master and these two great prophets. Throughout their time together, Jesus has been pointing them toward the Kingdom of God. His very first recorded words in Mark’s Gospel are “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Just six days before, remember, he has told them that some of them will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God come with power. As good Jews, they would have known the promises of scripture regarding that fulfillment. The words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” And the promise of God through the prophet Malachi: “See, I will send you Elijah the man of God before the day of the Lord comes.” That’s why the disciples reported that some people thought Jesus was Elijah. Those folks were on to something, but Jesus wasn’t Elijah. He was the embodiment of the Kingdom of God itself.

It’s all simply too much for Peter and he starts babbling. Thank God for Peter! I mean, bless his heart. If there’s a thing to be done the wrong way around, Peter will find it. He charges in where he should wait, equivocates when he should be sure and generally flaps his jaw at the most inappropriate times. Peter always comforts me greatly because if a screw-up like him can be given the keys to heaven, I know there’s hope for a little place for me. Church tradition tells us that Mark based his Gospel on stories he heard from Peter, and I think it’s greatly to Peter’s credit that he told this story to Mark. Can’t you hear him? “Well, young man, to tell you the truth, I was so scared, I just started talking.” I’m not sure I would have been that coherent in that situation. Peter’s enthusiasm, at least, is admirable. He wants to stay in that glorious moment forever. The Greek Orthodox scholar, Stanley S. Harakas points out, “Peter articulates the all-too-human responses. On the one hand he refuses to accept the suffering, defeat and death; on the other, he readily expresses the desire to stay where the exaltation, victory and manifestation of full life are revealed.” Peter wants to build three huts, or booths, to commemorate the event, just as the Jews celebrated the Feast of Booths by building little huts to recall their time in the wilderness and how God came and dwelt with them, or tabernacled among them. John, the one evangelist whose Gospel does not tell the story of the transfiguration, picks up on this idea when he writes that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us;” literally, “pitched his tent with us.” “Pitched his tent” comes from the same root in Greek as the word Mark uses here for what Peter wants to build.
Peter’s babbling is halted by yet another phenomenon. A cloud billows up; again, a sure sign of the presence of God. God appears in a cloud by day to lead the Israelites across the desert. God appears to Moses as a cloud on Sinai. Mark says that they were overshadowed by the cloud, the same word used in Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary in Luke’s Gospel when he tells her how to expect the presence of God. Jesus later foretells his own return surrounded by the clouds of heaven and Paul reminds the Christians in Thessalonica of that promise. And, if there is any doubt about what the appearance of the cloud means, the voice of God is heard, with nearly the same words as at Jesus’ baptism: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” If the disciples were frightened before, I would imagine that they were absolutely terrified now. Mark writes, “And suddenly, when they had looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.” If it had been me, there would have been a bit of a gap between the voice and me looking around, because I would have been cowering on the ground with my hands over my head. This is really sort of a funny story, if you read it the right way. On the serious side, God has reminded the three apostles, that the one who has proclaimed himself as the Son of Man is also the Son of God. And they are to listen to him, even if they don’t particularly care for what he is saying. After Jesus pronouncement of his own death and the danger to them if they persist in hanging around with him, this must be a pretty hard message to hear, especially for Peter, who’s been called Satan less than a week before.

So, they pick themselves up and dust themselves off, and trudge down the mountain with Jesus to start all over again. They’re not allowed to hang out on the mountaintop, basking in the experience. Jesus has things to do, places to go, people to see. On the way back to the others, he once again tells them to keep the miracle to themselves. He is still not ready for the Messianic Secret to be revealed. He still doesn’t want people to follow him for the wrong reason. If the disciples tell this story now, it will sound like the coronation of a political messiah and that’s not who Jesus is. Jesus knows that to truly fulfill his mission of inaugurating the Kingdom of God, of helping people to hear the Good News to the poor and to experience release from spiritual prisons and healing of spiritual blindness, he’s going to have to die and be resurrected. Only once that is accomplished can this story be told and understood. Only when seen through the lens of the cross will this vision be able to have its full meaning.

So, now that we know the whole story, what is the meaning of the transfiguration for us? What can we take away from this peculiar tale? It’s a story that’s hard for our rational minds to cope with, hard to place in our polite, modern story of Jesus the wise teacher. In his commentary on this passage, Dan Clendenin points out, “Nothing is easier for Christians who have become over-familiar with the Gospel texts and traditions than to domesticate and diminish them—taming the ineffable, trivializing the indescribable, cutting and trimming to neuter God so as to manage him. In their social-scientific survey of 3,290 teenagers and parents, and 267 personal interviews, conducted across four years (2001–2005), Christian Smith and his colleague Melinda Lundquist Denton conclude that adults have effectively communicated to kids what they call a "Moral Therapeutic Deism:" be nice, don't do bad, for a remote deity wants you to be happy and feel good about yourself.” I was privileged to hear Dr. Smith speak to these ideas at Seattle Pacific University not long after the study was concluded. Among his remarks he noted that teenagers readily speak of this warm, fuzzy idea of God, but few of them can say what relationship Jesus has to all this and most show a great reluctance to even speak the name of Jesus.
But to deal with the transfiguration, Moral Therapeutic Deism won’t cut it. We’ve got to start dealing in the realm of miracles and manifestations of the Divine. In his book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner writes, “Mysticism is where religions start.... Religion as ethics, institution, dogma, ritual, Scripture, social action, all of this comes later and in the long run probably counts for less. Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat--to put it mildly--or with a bush going up in flames, a rain of flowers, a dove coming out of the sky.”

Another writer I admire, Annie Dillard, puts it even more bluntly in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke (in church)? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews! For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.” And Madeleine L’Engle wrote, “Would the angels cry out "Fear not!" if there were nothing to frighten us?” We serve an awesome God, and I mean that in the truest sense of the word “awesome” rather than the watered down version in use today. We Christians must live in the paradox of a God who knows us to the very number of hairs on our heads and loves us enough to give up everything but love for us, and yet who has the power to create the cosmos or to destroy it. Again, from Madeleine L’Engle, “(This is) Strong stuff. Mythic stuff. That stuff which makes life worth living, which lies on the other side of provable fact. How can we be Christians without understanding this? The incarnation itself bursts out of the bounds of reason. That the power which created all of the galaxies, all of the stars in all of their courses, should willingly limit that power in order to be one of us, and all for love of us, cannot be understood in terms of laboratory proof, but only of love.” When we take the story of the transfiguration seriously, we come face to face with that living, dangerous, loving God.

The story of the transfiguration also fulfills Jesus’ promise to the disciples, and to us, that the Kingdom of God has begun. It has arrived in power at the transfiguration, as he suggested it would six days before the journey up the mountain. As Luke records Jesus saying, the Kingdom of God is within us, or, perhaps a better translation, the Kingdom of God is among us. Of Jesus’ teaching, the great New Testament scholar, Joachim Jeremias wrote that “Jesus held a paradoxical juxtaposition of the kingdom of God as both a present reality and a future expectation.” It is both now and not yet, inaugurated but not fulfilled. “The world has been given God’s promise that in the future all things will be made whole. Jesus embodies the promise because he anticipates in his person the new life that we humans and all creation are destined to share. Jesus is the future made present.” We who follow Jesus, who take his example as our model and who live our lives, as Paul so often said, “in Christ,” we are citizens of that Kingdom of God, which has intruded into the world where governments draw lines on a map and claim power over those who live within their borders. The Kingdom is not yet fulfilled but it will be. And until the time it is fulfilled, we are God’s ambassadors to the world – called to offer God’s peace to all we encounter, to spread the Good News of healing and restoration.

Like Peter and James and John, we can’t stay on the mountaintop, much as we might like to. Our experience of our Awesome God and the transfigured Christ carries with it a call to action. Remember the voice: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!” And remember what Jesus has just said to his disciples: “Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind;
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he must take up his cross, and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if someone will let themselves be lost for my sake and for the Good News, that one is safe.” There is dirty, dangerous work to be done, spreading the word of peace where there is war, reaching out hands of healing and love to those who struggle with the modern demons of mental instability or addiction, visiting the poor and the prisoners. Jesus knew what we would have to face; he did it himself.

On the day before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this: “I have been to the mountain top, I just want to do God's will. God has allowed me to go up to the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land, so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing anyone, for my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” That’s what Peter, James and John saw on the mountaintop, the glory of the coming of the Lord. That’s why this story is remembered every year on the Sunday just before Lent. We have work to do, down here in the valley. We will find the strength to do it through the Spirit of the Lord, Jesus, whose love sustains us always. Like the apostles, like Dr. King, like countless Christians before us, we can take courage from knowing that we are within the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of God is within us. Let us go forth today with the vision of the transfigured Jesus before us, serving humanity, standing for the truth, and following God’s holy way.