

Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Sunday of the Transfiguration, 14 February 2021
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[Last Epiphany B; 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9]

Christian. What does that mean? What does that mean? Along with the American flags, and Trump flags, and Confederate battle flags, and QAnon signs and banners carried into the US Capitol by violent insurrectionists a bit over a month ago, there were numerous “Jesus” and “Jesus saves” signs and banners, large crosses held aloft, and lots of God-talk. So-called Christianity in America had a whole lot to do with what happened on January 6. I call it junk Christianity, and it seems to me the church at large is called to a reckoning with junk Christianity far more extensive and intensive and public than we have yet undertaken in a truly serious and collective way. This sermon, of course, can only be a tiny, tiny contribution to that reckoning, but this Sunday of the Transfiguration seems to me a good occasion to venture some reflections.

Our Gospel for today is Mark, chapter 9, verses 2 through 9. But verse 2 begins a bit differently than what we heard. Verse 2 begins, “Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain...” Six days later. In other words, Mark begins his telling of the Transfiguration by linking it to something that happened *before*. So, what happened, six days before?

What happened was a highly significant and highly charged conversation between Jesus and his disciples, a conversation Jesus initiated by asking them, “Who do people say that I am?” and then “Who do *you* say that I am?” When Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus immediately begins to tell them about the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem: great suffering, rejection, being killed, and rising again. Peter objects vociferously, and Jesus turns on him and says, “Get behind me, Satan!”, and then says, “If any want to become my

followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me.” Not, we might as well note, take up a big cross and parade it as a prop in a violent insurrection, but, take up *your* cross, and follow *me*.”

It seems pretty clear that violent insurrection was in fact exactly the kind of thing Peter had in mind for Jesus; after all his country had been “stolen” from him, from the Jewish people, by the Romans, a generation or so before, and they all longed for the day when Israel would be great again. But Jesus is clearly saying that’s not what he is about: “Get behind me, Satan!”

Mark shares with us this vision of Jesus on the mountain, blazing with light, but wants us to understand that this is a Jesus who has embraced and voluntarily entered upon a path of suffering service, a path of love that will bring him rejection and get him killed. The Jesus that shines with divine light is the Jesus who has rejected violence, rejected power itself (at least power as this world understands it), and accepted the path of suffering love, and of rejection and death, as the path toward true life. *This* is the light of God, shining in this dark, violent, frightened world.

What do you think?

Let’s not be glib about this. Let’s not be so sure that we are obedient followers of *this* Messiah. One reason, I’d say, that we gather again and again, Sunday by Sunday, to celebrate and renew our faith, is that truly disavowing, thoroughly disavowing the worship of power and security, truly and thoroughly being freed from the fear of suffering and death, is no easy thing, not something we can relax about having accomplished.

It is only Jesus, living in us, leading us, loving us, suffering and praying in us, that can lead us through that transformation. I'm not there yet, I'll tell you that. If Jesus is who we say he is, then "Get behind me, Satan!" was the most loving thing Jesus could say to Peter in that moment. Are we prepared to hear the same? Are we at peace with that harsh and dreadful love?

Today we hear this from Paul in 2nd Corinthians:

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers. In truth, I don't think Paul would be too surprised to learn that these words might come to describe people who claim to profess faith in Christ. To worship power, to fear losing power, to embrace violence so that your side can "win." This is the very definition of unbelief, of apostasy from Christian faith, from the Gospel; this is to be blinded by the "god of this world", that is, the devil. Whether or not you're comfortable conceptualizing the devil as an actual, personal being—and I'm not so sure about that myself—the presence of the Evil One and the Evil One's power and influence in this world are inescapable in the New Testament, and that's who Paul means by "the god of this world."

To turn to the Gospel of John for a moment, Jesus has some very clear things to say about the god of this world. In a dispute with the corrupt, fearful, powerful leaders who find him so threatening, Jesus says,

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

We choose who our "father" is, we choose *who we are from*, spiritually speaking, by what we do,

including what we think and what we say. And Jesus identifies two key traits of the Evil One: he's a murderer, and a liar. When you boil it down, evil is about two things: lies, and murder. The willful distortion of truth for one's own gain, power, and advantage, on the one hand; and the will to destroy another person on the other. Lies and murder are the essence of evil. Christians should know this.

Lies are nothing new in public life, but in recent years lies have proliferated like never before, and have been embraced by professing "Christians" like you've never seen before, and yes, murder, too. And underneath it all is fear. Fear of losing power and influence, fear of the "other"; fear, now, of mob violence. Today, many elected officials in the United States cannot help but think about how their votes and decisions, one way or the other, could place themselves and their families at risk of violence, of murder; and it's all been stoked by lies.

Murder and lies wield frightening power in our world, and in this nation, in our government at the highest levels, right now, today. And this situation has been aided and abetted by numerous influential "Christian" leaders at every level. The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers. But as Christians, I'd say we ought not to be surprised. If you step back and look at the New Testament, it seems to me that one inescapable takeaway is that religion is an exceptionally dangerous thing. The New Testament shows us religious people, religious people who belong to the *right* religion, the *true* religion, the leaders of God's chosen covenant people, violently rejecting God's truth, God's way, God's life, God's presence among them. The New Testament is a cautionary tale for religious people, *especially* if your religion is right, true, best; *especially* if you call yourself a Christian.

What do you think?

There is so much for us to do.

But it's crucially important, never more important, for us to gaze upon (as Paul says) *the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the*

light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

We are called to something so very difficult for us, but natural for Jesus: to vigorously denounce the junk Christianity that pervades our country, while not being seduced into self-righteousness and hatred. The seeds of evil are still present in us, and can only be burned out by the love of Christ, love that we must show and share with everyone, especially those who scandalize, disturb, provoke, and frighten us.

This is not about saying, hey, *we* are not like *them*. They belong to us and we to them. The evils we see in them exist in us as well. This is not about us and them; this is about: who is *Jesus Christ*? Who is *God*? We are called to love, to God's fierce and dreadful love, the harsh and dreadful love that names evil as evil, and love that will not rest until every human being shines with *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*.

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"
Behold the light of his belovedness, and listen.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells us: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* (John 15:12) Sometimes we miss the fact that just *before* this he said: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:9) So, if you think it through, if you do the math, so to speak, Jesus is, yes, *commanding* us to love one another in exactly the same way, with exactly the same love, with which the Father loves him. Because God loves you and me with exactly the same love as God's love for Jesus.

God loves you and me and every human being just as much as God loves Jesus. The blazing light of Jesus, transfigured on the mountain, that is the light of his belovedness. And we are loved with that same intensity, the same love, the same light; and that is the love we are called to pour out upon one another, upon *everyone*. There's nothing you can do to make God love you more; there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. You and I are powerless to change God. And *God is powerless* to

love you more, *powerless* to love you less; God always, already loves you, and every creature, infinitely.

Perhaps we'd do well, whenever we are tempted to hate another human being, or even to say, *I am not like that*, to picture them bathed in this infinite light, streaming with this blazing love, with this divine powerlessness, the powerlessness of the cross. If we're to do God's work in this world, if we're to be freed from fear, we need, again and again, to turn our gaze within, to behold again *the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*