

Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them,

3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Listening to God through Jesus

I wanted to take a moment to share a story about a trip I took in December 2005. I was traveling in Cuba at the end of the year. I was traveling from the capital city of Havana to a place called Varadero. I remember traveling by tourist bus for what I think was about four hours. At one of the rest stops along the way, I remember having a Piña Colada, and it was so good. While I was there having my drink, I struck up a conversation with a guy.

"Where are you from, are you Chinese by any chance?"

"No, I'm from Korea."

"Oh, you're from North Korea.?"

I was very surprised. So I answered right away.

"No, I'm from South Korea."

"South Korea? I was born, raised, and live here, and I've never met a South Korean before. You use the same word Korea, so it must be the same country. Where is South Korea?"

"North Korea is in the north, and South Korea is in the south."

He asked one more question.

"Ah, so there are countries in the north and south, but they're all the same people, right? They speak the same language, right?"

I tried to explain, but it would have taken too long.

It was this that I wanted to share with him: North Korea is a socialist country and South Korea is a democracy. There was a Korean War, and now, except for minimal diplomatic relations, it's impossible for ordinary people to travel between the two countries. South Koreans and North Koreans are now seen as two different cultures and countries. I should have talked about this, but I didn't have time.

Because the bus was ready to leave.

As it was leaving, I said again: "I'm a South Korean." He replied that he understood, but at the same time he looked like he didn't understand why I was making such a distinction between North and South Korea. I needed more time to explain, and I felt bad that he didn't understand me, but that's how I left him.

Even now, I often think back to that memory.

I wonder if he would still think of me as a person who is not much different from a North Korean. (I realize that the distinction between South Koreans and North Koreans is very important to me, but maybe it wasn't so important to him)

It was a bittersweet trip that ended with a really good piña colada.

Was there ever an incident where Jesus told his disciples something very important, but they didn't understand what it meant? I think the story of the Transfiguration is one of those important stories.

Today, as we hear the story of the disciples (Peter and Andrew and John) encountering the transformed Jesus, I thought about my own journey for a moment. The process of getting to know someone is often difficult because one's own culture, experience, and knowledge affect one's understanding. Perhaps that was the case for the disciples when they first saw the transformed Jesus.

Up until that point, Jesus' disciples had thought of him as a powerful teacher, a rabbi, and their leader because that's who they had met, seen, heard, and experienced. They developed expectations for Jesus based on these experiences. They believed that Jesus would restore Israel as their leader, which is why Peter's story of opposing Jesus' decisions is so relevant.

However, these three disciples in particular get a unique glimpse of Jesus. They see "Moses" and "Elijah," the great fathers of the Israelites, with Jesus. (I wonder how they knew they were Moses and Elijah in the days before the internet?)

Jesus' disciples were so terrified that they didn't know what they were talking about. Fear is the opposite of familiarity. It's the human emotion we feel when we experience something new, when we don't know what to expect, or when we're unsure of the outcome of that experience. Then there is a voice from heaven. God speaks.

"This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

Another way to paraphrase this statement is, "God speaks through his Son, Jesus."

In other words, to the disciples who were standing there in fear, God said, listen to Jesus.

And then, for the disciples who saw the transfigured Jesus, there was one thing that Jesus said to them, and that was that they were not to tell anyone about this event until after He rose from the dead.

So, today's story of Jesus' transfiguration is connected to the story of Jesus' suffering and death.

What's clear is that the disciples didn't fully understand the implications, and it's unfortunate (because they didn't understand it), but it was a very important event.

We don't know what Jesus talked about with Elijah and Moses.

However, we can understand Jesus' "credentials" in meeting with them meant that God's "authority" to lead and guide Israel was inherited and continued through Jesus.

In other words, I think the story shows that God's work through Moses and Elijah is now completed through Jesus.

So what is the key to completing this story?

It's the story of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

The puzzle left behind in today's story is hinted at in verse 9.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

That is, the disciples learned from the transfigured Jesus today that the puzzle of God's work through Moses and Elijah would be completed through Jesus in his suffering, death, and resurrection. It was so shocking that they were terrified, and so they didn't understand.

Perhaps, for the disciples, it remained an unacceptable fear because they could not comprehend such a will of God.

It's an interesting thing to hear God's voice.

In church, members and pastors often say, let's do God's will, let's do as the Bible guides us.

And we hesitate to face our fears. We tend to think that fear is not God's providence.

Because of that, the transformative event of Jesus takes us out of our comfort zone.

Why the suffering? Why the death? Why did Jesus, the Son of God, have to come to earth and suffer? These questions are the same for Jesus' disciples, the first century Christians, throughout history, and for you and me today.

This is where you and I begin our preparation for Lent.

"Why did Jesus have to suffer?" I want you to reflect on this one question in the coming days of Lent.

The meaning of what God said through Jesus can be unfamiliar and scary, but Jesus' disciples testify that there was truth in that fear. It's about moving beyond the familiar, the comfortable, and the understandable. This is Lent, a season that calls for a faith that is fearful, incomprehensible, and yet follows with the peace of the Lord.

During Lent, our ancestors of faith have historically practiced three things. Fast, Give, and Pray.

And they thought it helped them get to know the Lord better. As you and I prepare for Lent in 2024, may it be an opportunity to listen to God's Word through Jesus.

Let us pray.

O God, show us the secrets of heaven and enable us to do these things with Jesus Christ. With Jesus, we can walk this path, even if we are afraid. O Holy Spirit, give us the strength to do it, so that this Lent will be a time of true grace and blessings, and a time to get to know Jesus. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.