

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Mark 9:2-9

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

A Nachshon

First, I should say I misspelt today's sermon title. It is N-A-C-H-S-H-O-N. Second, I should say that as a preacher, I do not often pick sermon titles that leave people in the dark, as I have done so today. So, let's get right to it. What is a Nachshon?

Nachshon is a story rooted in the Exodus, the story of the people of Israel fleeing slavery in the land of Egypt. When Moses and company fled the oppressive Pharaoh, with the Egyptian armies in close pursuit, they came to the edge of the Red Sea. The water was in front of them, and maybe a lot of them hadn't had swimming lessons at the local YMCA. Certain death was behind them, certain death in front of them. They needed a miracle. In most tellings, Moses raises his arms and commands the waters to part, and they do...right?

But in Midrashic teachings, handed down over hundreds of years by rabbis, it may not have happened quite like that. Instead in that moment of great crisis, God told the people to move forward. Seeing nothing ahead but sea, no one dared take a step. That's where Nachshon comes in. Stepping down the bank, he put a foot in the water, and the water parted, just a bit. Then taking a next step, the water parted a little bit more. Step by step, little by little, the water receded, and the people were saved. (as told in *Courageous Faith: How to Rise and Resist in a Time of Fear*, Emily Heath, p. xx)

As Emily Heath tells this story in her new book *Courageous Faith*, she came learn in using this story in a sermon she wasn't pronouncing "Nachshon" correctly. A rabbi told her that it should always be pronounced with a hard "ch" sound in the throat -- Nachshon. It should almost feel like you are choking -- the reason being tradition has it that the waters did not start parting when Nachshon put a toe in. Rather he took a

step, then another, then another.... and it wasn't until the waters rose up past his waist, his shoulders, wasn't until the waters were entering his mouth and his nose that they began to give way. In other words, it took almost drowning before things began to change.

I found this story this week, and it proved to be a great story -- a great lens if you will, through which to view Mark's telling of the Transfiguration.

As Lincoln noted, the transfiguration comes smack in the middle of the gospel, and it marks the turning point from Jesus public ministry out and about in Galilee to his heading toward Jerusalem, that place of deepened opposition, trial, and death.

Just before Jesus and Peter and James and John climb the mountain, there is an exchange in which Jesus asks the disciples who people are saying he is. And they told him, some say John the Baptist, and some say Elijah, and others, one of the prophets. But pressing them Jesus says but who do *you* say that I am? And Peter says you are the Christ, which means the anointed one, the Messiah.

Jesus then rewards Peter by giving his first passion prediction, telling the disciples that he, the Son of Man, "will suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and chief priests, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8: 31) The disciples don't want to hear it. Peter speaks out, saying no Jesus, no way. There is no match in Peter's mind between the Messiah he and his people have waited for, and this description Jesus gives.

So that's the context for the story we hear today. After causing this cognitive dissonance if you will Jesus invites a select few, Peter, James and John to accompany him to a high place, where he is transfigured – changed in appearance --before them.

Our anthem this morning might cast a light on the transfiguration. It may be itself a blessing. Before Jesus goes to Jerusalem, before he does this hard thing he has this experience of being held in God's light, this fortifying experience of being in the presence of two great figures of the faith, Moses and Elijah. A blessing can go beyond words, and this certainly does. Peter, in fact, seems kind of foolish trying to put words and an earthly context to something that is clearly of a wholly other realm.

Peter's misunderstanding, his trying to make this moment something he can understand and therefore own is a caution to us. The story of the transfiguration reminds us that if God is God there are going to be some things, sometimes, some experiences that rather defy description – even our human understanding. After Peter offers his suggestion of building booths, commemorating the moment the voice from above, the voice that spoke at Jesus baptism says "This is my Son, the Beloved, Listen to him!" This glorious sublime experience has within it a correction, a heavenly reprimand if you will. Remember Peter doesn't want Jesus to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He'd prefer a different narrative. "Listen to him" is likely directed at all the disciples, but perhaps particularly to Peter, and to that part of

ourselves that believes we can go through this life somehow spared the realities of suffering and death.

But having said that, let's make something clear -- let's say something about what the Transfiguration *is not*. It *is* Jesus preparing to go to Jerusalem, it *is* about his facing there what needs to be faced, but it is *not* a glorification of suffering as the path to God. People often use a phrase, "the way of the cross" to where it sounds like we should seek or regard suffering as a spiritual good in itself or as inherently saving and redemptive. You know, this has been the way the church has often interpreted it, though that may be unfortunate, and frankly, wrong. Jesus suffering and death did not happen so Jesus could purge the world of sin and evil. He died because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to an alternative way of being, of being religious, namely the rejection of violence and the holding up of nonviolence, justice, and truth.

As someone has put it, the evilness of evil is what killed Jesus. And Jesus love as made known in his life, death, and resurrection doesn't so much dominate or defeat evil as much as it challenges, exposes, and seeks to transform it. (Rodney Hunter, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol 1, p. 254)

I guess what I am saying is that we should hear "the way of the cross" as about faithfulness, as being about putting our lives in God's hands and fully into God's purposes, which may ultimately bring about suffering, but also in other cases, great joy.

The transfiguration could also be misunderstood as being primarily about God's glory – God's glory come to us. You know that sort of religion, maybe you have heard it. We are small, insignificant, but our little egos can bask in Jesus power and glory. If we turn ourselves over to Jesus, Jesus will make us great. But Jesus mission was not to make a big deal of himself or to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority, or prestige. As one commentator says Jesus was clothed in the dazzling light of God – but only briefly, and only to a select few. The power of God experienced in Jesus time on the mountaintop is fleeting, elusive. Further, Jesus pointed, always pointed *beyond himself* – to the work of God in bringing about the kingdom of God here on earth. When the transfiguration is over, Jesus and his disciples have their feet on the ground, they immediately come down off the mountain – and back to a world of human need.

So, having said a few things about what the transfiguration is not, what do we do with this strange passage? In my earlier days as a preacher I was often tempted to just ignore it: It's altogether too strange, too far from our regular experience. But I now believe the transfiguration can speak to us even if we have not ourselves had experiences in our life that felt transporting, experiences where we could say "Wow, that was so definitely the power of God here, here with me, or here in this room."

We need to take hold of how the passage ends --with Jesus instructing Peter, James and John to tell no one what they have seen. This Messianic Secret, Jesus telling the disciples not to tell people who he is, is a big thing in Mark's gospel, and this is because of Mark's great belief that no one can understand Jesus and how God was working in and through Jesus until they have heard the whole story. So again, despite Peter's attempt to "get it", he and the other disciples won't get it until Jesus has gone to Jerusalem, been rejected, been tried, been crucified, and until the day of resurrection has come.

And aren't we often in times like that, where what something means for our lives, for our world isn't clear to us, and won't be for quite some time? Maybe what the transfiguration tells us is that God can speak to us in such times. God can lead us forward. The uncertainty we feel and the anxiety this often brings doesn't mean that God isn't there.

So, before we say "Amen" think with me a bit about Nachshon. Isn't the figure of Nachshon a great way of thinking about Jesus? Jesus is one who will put himself on the line in order to bring liberation to others. And just as the figure of Nachshon shows that God needs human agents, this man who, when things look very dire, will keep on walking, isn't it also true that here in a faith community we need each other to show us who Jesus really is? Not who we might want him to be to serve our preconceived notions but who Jesus really is – namely one who seeks above everything to serve the purposes of God?

Here in our church, we might see the love of Jesus in our Sunday school teachers who patiently teach. Or we might see the compassion of Jesus in the Monday meals folks who welcome people in Jesus name. We might see Jesus concern for wellbeing in mentors who take time to get to know young people, or in people in a covenant group or bible study who risk being vulnerable in order to let the light of God shine through them. We might see Jesus in the person who courageously speaks up on behalf of those who have little power and little voice. We might see Jesus in the person who challenges us not to think too little of ourselves, or in some other cases, not to think too much of ourselves. This week the season of Lent begins, and in this special season I encourage you to look around you. Look around you to see how right here in this people of God the identity of Jesus is being revealed.

We are living in times that seem in so many ways to be frightening, uncertain. We can relate to those people at the Red Sea, seemingly paralyzed as they considered an army behind them, a sea in front of them. We can relate to Jesus turning toward Jerusalem, knowing the road ahead will be difficult. But God shows up in times like these.

So, look around you. Where are you learning something more about who Jesus is and who *you* might be as a result? Where is God offering you a blessing, an encouragement in this journey of life?

And consider for a moment that God might be calling you. Yes you to be a Nachshon -- to step out of the crowd, to keep walking into the waters yes now, precisely in these times which seem so frightening and so uncertain.

For the transfiguration poses a question to each one of us, and to the church. In this time, in this present age can we believe that God will make a way -- a way through us?

Amen.