

King's Cross, 1
Worship

Mark 9: 2 - 8

Even though Ash Wednesday isn't until this Wednesday, we are beginning our "Lenten Preaching Series" today, one week early. The reason for that is that last June as I was putting together our preaching schedule for this year, I decided I wanted to include Timothy Keller's book, "King's Cross" as a Lenten study, because it is a typically powerful Keller book, a look at familiar things of our faith with 'fresh eyes', and I wanted you to experience it. But as Karen Murray and I were later on looking at the book, and trying to figure out how we were going to fit an 18 chapter book into a season that only has seven Sundays (if you include Easter), it dawned on me that we were going to have to be creative.

If you have a copy of the book, you'll know that it is divided into two parts. Part One is, essentially about who Jesus *is*. It is a wonderful work of theology, one of the freshest pictures of the Trinity that I've ever read - and Lord willing, I think we're going to tackle that this coming summer. Part Two focuses on 'what Jesus *did*'. (And both parts one and two are based on the Gospel of Mark). I decided that part two really fit better with the themes of Lent - with its focus on the Cross, the Resurrection, the Garden, and so forth.

And, if we were to start one week *before* Lent, and include Holy Thursday as one of the parts of the series, we end up with nine available weeks - and King's Cross, part two (chapters 10 - 18) fits perfectly. Just a word for those of you who are reading along with these messages, and especially those doing a small group study: we're not exactly doing these chapters in the book's order. To better fit a couple of the Holy Days in Lent, I switched the order around a bit; you can see the final schedule on the Home Page of our Website (meetwithGod.com).

But, as is so frequently the case, my humble attempts at scheduling in advance have ended up working out way better than was frankly, my intention. If I didn't believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, I'd say that I got lucky once again, but we all know better than that!

King's Cross, 1

Worship

The topic of chapter 10 is perfect as a 'prequel' to this series, and to this season... and, as you'll see, I'm really happy to be able to share this message *before* our Taizé Ash Wednesday service this week!

The Scripture we will read from Mark 9 today is the account of a mysterious event in the life of Jesus called 'the Transfiguration'. In the Liturgical church the Transfiguration is celebrated on a date that moves around, connected to the date of Easter, and as it falls in mid-summer (this year it is August 6) it usually passes us by.

But while it is mysterious, and buried in the liturgical year, it is also important, and Keller helps us to catch a glimpse of something in this event that is so foundational to the way we practice our faith that, as I said earlier, is the perfect way to prepare our entry into the Holy season of Lent, because it addresses the question 'why' - why will we be gathering in this place in the coming weeks?

And beyond that, why do we do this 'church thing' week in and week out... year after year? What's the point of our coming together? What can we expect to happen? What *should* we expect in these gatherings - what should we be looking for?

The Gospel of Mark has a clear transitional point that occurs in the chapter right before today's Scripture (which we'll read in just a moment). In Mark 1 - 8, little by little, Mark recounts the unveiling of Jesus' identity to this rag tag group of followers called disciples. They hear him teach, they see his acts of compassion, they witness his miracles. And in Mark 8:27, Jesus decides that the time has come, and he asks them, "*Who do people say that I am?*"

They all give their various responses until Peter says, "You are the Messiah". In another Gospel he adds: "The Son of the Living God". So, they've received the 'message'. They 'get it'. Jesus is the Messiah. Right after that, in verse 31, we read this:

King's Cross, 1

Worship

*** "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days, rise again. He spoke plainly about this..."*

Throughout the rest of the Book of Mark, we hear Jesus constantly talk about his death and suffering, and why it is necessary, what it would accomplish. He also begins to share a more vivid picture of what it means for those disciples to follow him - we would be expected to pick up 'our Cross', just as he would.

And we find, as well, that two themes are linked - two themes that we just wouldn't expect to be put together, (they seem contradictory), if we didn't already know what we know! The two themes are 'the cross' and 'glory'. These two are inseparable in Jesus' life, and, as we'll see in the coming weeks, they are also connected in *our* lives as well.

But the introduction to that rather heavy thought is found in today's Scripture...

*** Let's read this passage now ... (Mark 9: 2 - 8)*

2 After six days [i.e., six days after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah] 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. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. 4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

*** 5 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." 6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)*

7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

*** There's a passage in the Old Testament book of Exodus that describes God coming down on Mount Sinai in a cloud. The voice of God came out of that cloud, and everyone was afraid. The people of Israel surrounding that mountain were banned from touching even its base on pain of death, because it was holy. God was *there*. Then Moses went to the top of that mountain, received the Law, and later had a conversation with God. God there reaffirmed his calling to Moses lead his people. But Moses wants assurance - "How can I be sure that you will be with me?"*

King's Cross, 1

Worship

And God says, "I'll be with you."

To which Moses replies: "Now, show me your glory" ...your infinite greatness and unimaginable beauty.

** But God responds:

"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence... But, you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. ...There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

(Exodus 33: 14 - 23, selected)

No one was able to see God's glory directly, but even getting near was enough to make Moses' face shine with such radiance that the people begged him to wear a veil when he returned, because they couldn't bear to look at him! He was frightening to them.

Back to Mark: now, here we are, centuries later, and once again there's a mountain, and a cloud, and a voice coming out of the cloud - and there's Moses once again! Is this Mount Sinai all over? No, because there's one (as Keller puts it) *head snapping twist*:

On Mount Sinai, Moses reflected the glory of God similar to the way that the moon reflects sunlight. But here, Jesus *produces* the glory of God; it is coming *from him*.

"Jesus does not *point* to the glory of God as Elijah, Moses, and every other prophet has done; Jesus *is* the glory of God in human form." As we read in Hebrews 1:3

*** The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory
and the exact representation of his being".*

So we see here something here that didn't happen on Mount Sinai - Peter, James, and John are *in the presence of God* - they 'see God's face' - and yet they do not die! Somehow, in Jesus, they were able to see the face of God, in a way that allowed them to live.

King's Cross, 1

Worship

** Now, that's not to say they weren't afraid. In fact, they *were*! Mark says they were so frightened they were speechless. Except for Peter, who typically, starts babbling - "*Rabbi... let's put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*". I think we hear that today and we wonder why Peter is offering to build housing for heavenly beings? What's with that?

Well that's not exactly what he was offering. The word that is translated 'shelters' is actually the Greek word for *tabernacle*. After God's glory came down on Mount Sinai, the Hebrew people built ... a tabernacle. It was a *place* - and as Keller suggests - not simply a place to worship, not a place for *access* to the Holy, but much more a place to mediate the gap between us and God, a **place to protect human beings from the divine presence**".

So, in essence, Peter is saying, "We need a place, we need rituals, we need *something* to shield us, to protect us from the 'unveiled' presence of God.

But as he's saying this, a cloud appears and covers Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. And from within this 'glory cloud', the voice of God is heard: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

This is a quote from Keller:

"When the cloud comes down, not only do the disciples not die, they are surrounded and embraced by the brilliance of God. They hear God the Father speaking of his love for the Son, just as he did when Jesus was baptized at the beginning of Mark. Then suddenly the cloud goes away, and they are left standing there blinking in the comparatively dim light of the mountaintop, in a state of electrified wonder.

James, Peter, and John have experienced *worship*.

Worship is a preview of the thing that all of our hearts are longing for, whether we know it or not. We seek it in art, in romance, in the arms of our lovers, in our family....

...Worship is not just believing. Before they went up the mountain, Peter, James, and John already believed in God. And Peter had already said, "You are the Christ." But now they have sensed it. The presence of God has enveloped them. They have had a foretaste of what [C. S.] Lewis says all of us are longing for: the very face and embrace of God."

King's Cross, 1

Worship

I mentioned earlier that following Peter's confession, that Jesus began to talk more and more about his impending death and suffering. It is easy to forget - especially when we are focusing our attention on the Divine aspect of Jesus' being (i.e., that he was *God*) that he was also fully human. And because he was fully human, he had human needs just like all of us.

As Jesus was about to enter his public ministry, in the first Chapter of Mark, we see at his baptism the Spirit descending on him 'like a dove' and we hear the Father's affirmation - "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." That affirmation from his Father encouraged him, filled him, prepared him to go out and begin the work he came to do.

Now, once again we see the Father covering Jesus with his presence - the light of Glory, and the voice - and in this way Jesus is fortified to go out for the far greater test that he would face and he moves courageously to face his execution on the Cross. But, as Keller points out, it is not only Jesus who gains strength from this experience: God is also preparing the disciples for the test that they will face when their leader is taken from them.

I'd like to read one page from King's Cross now, rather than try to summarize it, let me share this with you in Keller's words, and then we can talk about it a bit...

**** (blank)** He asks, "Have you ever had that kind of experience? When the compassion and love of another person helped you deal with your suffering? When someone's unconditional approval and encouragement transformed your fear into resolve? When an encounter with beauty seemed to neutralize your anxiety and give you hope?"

And if you got that kind of help more often, wouldn't you be different? Wouldn't trouble make you wiser, deeper, and stronger instead of bitter and hard and joyless? Wouldn't suffering make you more compassionate, rather than more cynical about human nature? Wouldn't failure be more likely to be productive in your life? Of course it would.

But here's the question: How are you going to get more of that kind of approval, that kind of encouragement, that kind of love, without burning out your friends and family with your neediness?

King's Cross, 1

Worship

The answer for us, as it was for the disciples, is *worship*. You must have access through worship to the very presence of God. You have to see clearly in your mind what God has done, and is doing through Jesus. You have to experience foretastes of that embrace God is going to give you someday. You need to actually *sense* what you know of God's love.

It's one thing to be told that somebody is remarkable attractive. You believe it, but when you actually see him or her up close, you say, "Oh, *wow*." What happened? Did you get new information? No -- you're *experiencing* what you already knew to be true. Somebody says, "This restaurant is unbelievable; it's the best." You believe what you're told, but when you go there and eat, your'e still bowled over. Did you get new information? No -- you're *experiencing* what you already knew to be true. It's one thing to know that the glorious Creator God loves you, cares for you, holds you, but it's another thing to sense it, to experience it. Whatever life brings you, you will need those foretastes to nourish and strengthen you.

The transfiguration is not just a miraculous parlor trick to convince the disciples of Jesus's deity. It is an experience of collective worship that they are going to need for what's ahead.¹

** I think that there is great wisdom here. Let me repeat one sentence: "[We]... need to actually *sense* what [we]... know of God's love."

Worship, in that light, is not simply us supporting an institution with our presence, and our offerings. It's not simply a time when we get together with like minded people, or even people with whom we are connected by the Holy Spirit. Worship is more than a time to be taught something about the Scripture or our faith, or to hear what is going on in the faith community. Because while all of those things are good things, and even *important* things, they don't get to the heart of worship.

** They don't express our *need to actually sense what we know of God's love*. Because just knowing isn't enough. Just reading about it doesn't last. If we don't understand that we have a built in *need* to connect with the Holy, that we need - as even Jesus did - to 'see God' unveiled so that we can continue on the path God has laid out for us ... if we don't 'get that', our faith will

¹ King's Cross, Timothy Keller, p. 117-118

King's Cross, 1

Worship

suffer. Our resolve to live the life we've been called to live will eventually erode. Our joy in Christ will become disappointment and perhaps cynicism... our compassion for those hurting will dry up...

I see it all the time.

You know, I really try to be careful not to become that old guy who is constantly remembering 'the good ol' days'... you know... but I'm going to make an exception today. People are constantly complaining about the moral state of our nation, the lack of interest in God among people - particularly young people. But, you know what grieves me the most, as far as a change in our culture?

It's not the behavior of the 'world' - it's how the church has failed to see the significance of worship for our spiritual vitality. Believe me, I know that this is a complicated world - I know there are work demands, and complications with custody sharing, and a general sense of feeling overwhelmed that makes pulling the covers over our heads on Sunday morning very seductive. But, I've seen the patterns - and so have you: I'll stay home today. (I'll read the sermon on line!) And one week turns into two, and then ten, and then we're mad because not enough people have noticed that we're not in Church... and two years later, we see a name on the 'inactive role'.

I truly believe that the influence of the Church on our culture has eroded significantly over the time that my generation has 'been in charge' because we have not understood the transformative power of worship - we've looked at it as an 'extra', as an 'option' for when we nothing else better to do. We have either forgotten, or we never understood the inner *need* that we have as human beings to have a regular time where we experience the awesome love of our Creator that can't simply be described. It needs to be felt. And worship - in community - just like here in Mark 9 - is when that is most likely to happen.

I am grieved whenever I hear someone imply that a worship time was less than satisfactory because they didn't like the songs, hymns, the band, or the choir... or that the sermon was not to their liking. Worship is not songs, or a band, or a choir - those are human ways to help us access the unveiled presence of God. And sometimes what works for one doesn't 'work' as well for

King's Cross, 1

Worship

another. But the rituals, like the ancient Tabernacles, sometimes end up distancing us from God, rather than bringing us closer. Because of our inner fear of exposure, or judgment, we use those things to push us away. I don't know...

I wonder how many of us come here with an expectation that we *are going to see God* today in worship? Or, do we come simply out of duty... out of habit, or routine? How would an expectation of seeing God change our attitude about worship? How would that expectation impress upon us the importance of our gatherings? How might that, over time, help us to see ourselves, and God, and others differently?

I remember back when I was serving my first church. Some folks (relatives!) would come by occasionally to visit, and I can't help but remember how, after the Worship service we would all go to our home for lunch, and they would immediately go into the living room, turn on the TV and watch 'The Three Stooges'. And I would think, "How can you go from being in the presence of the Awesome God to 'yuk, yuk, yuk'?" I didn't get it. But I think there was a lack of understanding about worship.

I counseled a man recently, doesn't go to church. He came to me for spiritual help, and he spent nearly an hour telling me about why he doesn't go to church - mainly because we 'always ask for money', and too many people come on Christmas and Easter... and he reads the Bible, but skips books like James because it makes him feel guilty. Then he tried Christian radio, but the preachers all seem to expect Christians to 'be, like really super committed...' This was, really a good, moral man. But I had to say to him, you know, sometimes guilt is *real!* But he was avoiding God because all he could see was Laws and no grace. And because of this lack of Grace, he ran from the very thing that would help him. (I prescribed a Philip Yancey book, and I hope he comes back after reading it.)

** Right after the account of the Transfiguration in Mark, there is a story of Jesus coming upon a group of disciples who are in a big argument with the crowd. It turns out that there is controversy over a boy who is gripped by an 'evil spirit'. The disciples are unable to heal him.

King's Cross, 1

Worship

Well, this is a significant story, but we don't have time to get into the details. Except to say this- Jesus heals the boy. And later, privately, they ask Jesus why they were unable to drive it out. And Jesus simply replies: "This kind can come out only by prayer."

What is certainly implied here is that these disciples were attempting to engage in spiritual battles (which, by the way, according to the Scriptures is pretty much a summary of what the Christian life is all about!) but they were fighting spiritual battles without prayer. They were trying to do spiritual things without spiritual resources.

There is so much more to the Christian faith than what we can 'get' from God. There is work to do, there are difficult commands to live (i.e., to love one another as Christ loved us!) To think that we can do this without help is foolish. And one of the most potent resources in our arsenal is to glimpse the Glory of God in Worship.

We need to experience what we know. Or, we will no longer know it in any significant sense.

I offer this to you as an introduction to the contemplative season of Lent: come to worship *expecting* to meet with God. Not to be entertained, or to be taught, but to *worship*. To experience what we *know*. See what happens.

One of the most 'worshipful' experiences that we do in this church is our Taize style worship times. We sing Scriptures and prayers, and we repeat them until they become more than words, they come from our heart. God is - to many - very present in these times. And then, we sit in silence, remembering Habakkuk's call: "The Lord is in his holy Temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him."

I hope that perhaps this service will be a new experience of Grace and worship for many here. I pray that beyond that, this entire season of Lent will provide many opportunities for all of us to catch a transformative glimpse of the Holy. Amen.

King's Cross, 1
Worship