

I guess it was about ten years ago when I was still somewhat newly ordained that I had a conversation with a colleague of mine that stands out in my memory. I don't know if he was tired or dejected or something else, but he said to me, "I've made my peace with the fact that we all just keep on saying the same things over and over again. It's okay."

Well, I hadn't yet made such a peace. I was still fairly enthusiastic about being as original as the text would permit me to be. I still am, but now I think I understand where he was coming from. There are certain texts that it is hard to come up with original thoughts to illuminate. These transfiguration texts fall into that category. And to a certain extent, I suppose almost the whole gospel falls into that category – we are saying the same thing over and over and over again, and it's good news.

This reminds me of the story of a new pastor who arrived in his congregation (I can tell this story now because I'm not so new here anymore) and after he preached his first sermon, his congregation was elated because they had called a very fine preacher. The next Sunday, the church was packed because the congregation anticipated another barn-burner of a sermon. The sermon was a barn-burner, but it was the exact same sermon the pastor had preached the Sunday before, word for word. Much discussion ensued and the congregation determined that clearly, he had simply been overwhelmed by the move and hadn't had time to write a new sermon. One week later, the packed house listened in incredulous silence as the same sermon was preached, yet again, word for word. At which point the elders of the church agreed something must be done, and so they approached him about his constant repetition. "Pastor, you've preached the same sermon three weeks in a row," they said.

“You’ve noticed?” He said.

“Yes,” they replied, “we were wondering when you plan to preach a different one?”

“That’s easy,” he countered, “I will happily do so as soon as I see that you’ve done something with the one I’ve already preached.”

Unless I’m mistaken at some point in his or her career, almost every preacher tells that story, and almost every congregation dutifully laughs at it. It’s a great story with a great point... but we’ve heard it all before.

Rest assured I won’t be taking that approach – I’ve already told you that I prize a certain amount of originality – but there’s something about that story that does seem to highlight the repetitiveness of the Gospel. It is sort of the same story, over and over and over again.

Every year, beginning right after Thanksgiving, we embark on an extremely compressed version of the life of Jesus – we start with shepherds, angels, magi – then we dance on over to epiphany and the baptism of the Lord just before we come to transfiguration (today) and then begin long hard slog of Lent towards the cross. We celebrate Easter, skirt around the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as best we can, and then enjoy the season of ordinary time as reward for our good behavior before we start the whole thing off again.

It has a big of a groundhog day feel about it at times.

We do have something of a repetitive message at times. We spend our lives together and I hope when we’re apart thinking about and talking about such things as hope, redemption, and forgiveness. We talk about being generous, being kind, and loving our neighbors.

I'm sure other congregations have other things they talk about, but those seem to be our talking points around here. And for what's worth, I do believe our talking points are pulled straight from the heart of the gospel – the word *gospel* means *good news*, after all. I wonder, though, if it has a bit of a groundhog day feel about it? You remember *Groundhog Day*? Bill Murray reliving the same day over and over again until he finally gets it right? We're working with a great story with a great point... but we've heard it all before.

The Gospel of Mark has a groundhog day feeling about it at times too. It is by far the shortest of the Gospel narratives and yet it still manages to recycle some of the same themes... Jesus always seems to be casting out demons and telling them to not to tell anybody... then after he does that for a while, he starts predicting his death, over and over, all the while the disciples seem to just barely be missing his point. It's the same pattern, repeated throughout – almost like Mark wants to be sure we're getting it so we'll do something about it.

There's no doubt that Mark wants us to do something about it... it's all over his narrative. He works his way from compelling story to compelling story at lightening speed. He goes, snap, snap, snap from healings to exorcisms to miracles like a short order cook in the beginning of Mark's version of the story. Mark's favorite word is *immediately* and immediately he takes off running telling us all these wonderful stories, structured incredibly similarly, with remarkably alike outcomes, one right after another, great stories, all with great points, and then wham! The whole narrative slams to a halt on top of the mountain.

It is like the eye of the hurricane. Amidst all of the almost chaotic ministry of Jesus, rushing from one person to the next, there is this surreal calm. Jesus and three of his disciples encounter the bizarrely holy on top of the mountain.

For those with eyes to see, it is a clarifying moment.

Jesus is seen with Moses and Elijah – Moses, who encountered God on the mountaintop so long ago, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets

Moses, who went up on Sinai to encounter the living God and was so transformed that from that day on he wore a veil to cover the shining of his face so that his people could bear to talk to him.

And Elijah, who was simply taken up in a fiery chariot one day, leaving Elisha to carry on without him.

There, on the mountaintop, God breaks in.

There on the mountaintop, Jesus' identity, which up until now has been hidden to all but the demons he was casting out, is revealed to three of his followers.

Peter who has listened to Jesus talk about how he must suffer and die not once, not twice, but three times immediately has his eyes opened. The mundane has given way to the holy and he offers an alternative to the terrifying prospect that Jesus has been preaching.

“It is good, let us stay here.”

Peter gets treated like a dolt much of the time in Biblical scholarship. It's in vogue these days to note how the disciples stand as a foil in Mark to the folks who *get* what is going on. And it would be tempting assume that once more Peter is playing the foil to Moses and Elijah, but I'm not convinced. Peter gets it.

When Peter says, “it is good, let us stay here,” it’s not because he doesn’t get what is going on, it is because God’s breaking into the story has made it all too clear.

It’s good here. Let’s stay.

But that’s not really the point of all those good stories is it? That we should stay here, basking in the warmth of God’s holiness?

But if we’ve been listening to all of those great stories with all of those great points... we know we’re not long for the mountaintop. We don’t linger. Peter tried, bless him. I would have tried too, but the response to what Jesus is doing isn’t to sit around basking in holiness.

When God breaks in it is to do something.

God’s in-breakings give meaning to all the same old stories. They give us the eyes to see what God would have us see in the mundane, the day in and day out. You see, throughout Mark, there are these “pockets of the kingdom” where the will and way of God suddenly comes sharply into focus. Throughout Mark, we encounter all of these “aha!” moments where someone suddenly gets it. They get who Jesus is and what he is about. They get what God is doing in the world and generally what follows next is they go and tell everyone about it, even when Jesus orders them not to. There are all of these pockets of the kingdom sprinkled throughout Mark and when the transfiguration happens in the ninth chapter, it is an explosion of the kingdom onto the scene. If we have missed it up until this point, this is unmistakable. We have the presence of Moses, the bringer of the law, and Elijah, whom observant Jews would have instantly recognized as marker of the coming kingdom of God.

But it’s not so we can stay here basking in holiness. It’s so we’ll do something.

Dr. Alan Jones recounts in a sermon a scene from a novel by Andrew O'Hagan. The hero of the story remembers a moment from his childhood when a swallow's nest fell from the eaves of their home and his father brought all of them into the living room to look through the window at the unfolding drama. Would the chicks in the nest be rescued or stolen? Finally his concern overwhelmed him and he brought the nest into the house and taught his children how to feed the chicks with an eye-dropper. Two died, but one lived, and he put everything into the life of that bird. He took a pencil and pointed to where the bird's heart was beating. "We have interfered," he said, "But that is what people are meant for. Interfering, that's what we do." "Why?" I asked. "Because we're human beings..."

Dr. Jones continues, "The boy wonders whether the bird will live. 'It might die,' his father warns him. 'But is that possible, after all of the time we've spent?' 'It's possible, but haven't we learned a great deal about what it takes to keep a thing living?'

That's the call of conversion, he concludes, that we are called to interfere, in the good sense, on the side of life, and living.<sup>1</sup>

When our eyes are opened, we are indeed called to interfere, to interfere for good. When we encounter the kingdom of God, to be transformed by it, to allow it to take root in our lives and shape us, and shape the story in which we are living, indeed even to redeem the story in which we are living.

That's the story that Mark is telling, one where Jesus comes along and people get it and a pocket of the kingdom of God is opened.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus talked about letting our light shine. Indeed, in the letter we read today, Paul wrote, "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Alan Jones, Untitled Sermon preached at Chappaqua.

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.”<sup>2</sup>

That is our baptismal promise, that in the midst of mundane and unremarkable, we will let the light of Jesus shine through our lives. That's what we promise to do.

It does seem at times that we're wandering around in the same old story, wandering around doing the same things over and over again. We wander to work, we wander to the grocery store, we wander around with each other, and the seasons of our lives are marked by the rhythms of worship. Maybe you don't feel this way, but I do at times. At times it does seem like I do the same thing year in and year out. Perhaps that's uniquely because my life is ordered by the changing of the liturgical seasons. Isn't that true for all of us to a certain extent? It can be hard at times to maintain the focus that is required to make our lives a daily thank-offering to God, to let our lives shine as a response to God's grace and mercy. I know that. Wiser people than me have cautioned enthusiastic followers to pace themselves when it comes to faith, not to shine too brightly lest in shining we burn out. I suppose perhaps there is some truth to that. I suppose there is some risk involved in shining brightly. But then, I don't recall Jesus preaching any sermons where he cautioned his followers against risk. Indeed, he calls us to take the risk to shine brightly. We never know when the kingdom of God is going to break in, we never know when it will all come sharply into focus. When it does, shine. Shine on behalf of Christ. Interfere for good. Tell the good news. Shine.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:6