

“A God of Surprises: The Best of Our Tradition”

Mark 9:2-9

First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota

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God is a God of surprises. God doesn't always appear where we expect.

Jennifer Barchi, a pastor in Baltimore, was one of the first participants in our Pastoral Development Seminars five years ago. She writes this.

“Recently I returned to the church on my [former] college campus on a Sunday night. It was dark, the bright colors of the mosaic walls muted in the waning light, the stained glass windows that I knew by heart lifeless without illumination. . . . Heads were bowed as people prepared for the service of compline – the close-of-day rite in the Episcopalian tradition. . . . In my last year of college it was in this service that I found myself moving back towards the God that I had walked away from my freshman year. It was in this service that the Spirit grabbed hold of something inside me and drew me towards a mysterious sense of God's presence.

“So, when I was back in my college town just about a month ago, I returned to that holy space, expecting that I would have that same spiritual experience that I'd had before.

“But God wasn't waiting there for me. The darkness didn't seem as deep. I found it hard to settle. People came in late and fidgeted in their seats, disturbing the quiet. . . . But most of all, the sense of the Divine Presence, the holy mystery that had grabbed me as a young adult, it was gone. God was there, certainly, but God hadn't been waiting a decade for me to return to *that* place to meet me in the same way. And I was disappointed.”

We want an encounter with the Holy that neatly fits the frame of our experience. We want God to come back exactly the same way the Lord appeared before. We want to make sense of this present moment consistent with our assumptions, our past understandings, the best of our tradition.

But we bend our tradition to breaking when we push it too far.

You and I are surrounded each week by the symbols and greatness of our faith. The pulpit silently speaks of the power of God's Word. Without a sound the table tells us – the hungry, the wandering, the sometimes hopeless – that we are fed and sustained right here. The font proclaims that we are washed clean in baptism, washed clean from every wound, every failing that tempts us to believe we could never be God's beloved children again.

I am not willing to give up one bit of our tradition. But Jennifer Barchi is right: We lose our way when we demand the present moment to fit in the frame of the past.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Mark's Gospel tells the story: Jesus is taking three of his closest confidantes, Peter and James and John, up the hill. Those three don't know how, don't know why, but suddenly they are surrounded - surrounded by light, surrounded by a heavenly cloud, surrounded by Moses and Elijah, giants of the Jewish faith.

Moses and Elijah represent the best of their religious tradition: Moses, the teacher who risked his life by commanding Pharaoh to release the people of Israel; Elijah, the sole prophet who faced down all the disciples of the false god Ba'al.

Peter can't get over this vision of Moses and Elijah and Jesus. He wants to squeeze the experience into the tradition, focusing on Moses and Elijah, looking back in time, resting on the past, on these bedrock images of the Jewish faith.

But suddenly the voice of the Spirit interrupts. Their eyes clear; the cloud falls away. And Peter and James and John see. They see only Jesus.

The Greek of this verse is forceful and direct. “Suddenly, looking round, no longer no one they saw, except Jesus only . . .” They saw. They saw Jesus only.

They saw not Moses and Elijah, not their cherished past, not their honored tradition. They saw Jesus in the present moment.

Our Presbyterian patterns and practices are often time-honored and long established. But they are sometimes inflexible and unyielding. The Holy Spirit invites you and me not just to a familiar history, but to creative service *right now*, generous giving *right now*, clear vision *right now*.

Kari Nicewander served as a Presbyterian mission worker in Zambia. She shares this story. “It was dark, really dark. It is not always the wisest choice to drive through the rough bush roads when the sky is black and the evening has turned to night. But the radiator was leaking and the starter motor was broken. So every forty minutes we had to stop and find water at the nearest borehole and get some people from the villages to help push the truck. We were hours from our destination and not sure where to stop. I stood by the side of [the road], where the truck had pulled over yet again.

“Out of the darkness came a group of men; they saw our big red truck stopped on the side of the road. After leading us to water and waiting as the radiator was filled, they lined up behind the vehicle. We moved forward, slowly at first, and then the engine started. They waved good-bye, and we were off again to repeat this procedure throughout the night.

“We drove and stopped, drove and stopped, drove and stopped – always pulling over near villages, always relying on strangers to show us water, always receiving help in pushing the truck, time after time after time. . . . As the frustration mounted, and desperation for sleep and food arose, the strangers continued to emerge from the shadows, to help us, to push us, to wave us forward.

“We arrived at our destination. We did not need to sleep in the truck. Although we were unable to find dinner, there was a big breakfast in the morning. Food came. Sleep came. Help came. Hope came. Out of the darkness, again and again, light appeared.”

Let’s be honest. We don’t want to live this way. Like every other human, a part of us is tempted to run from faith, to give up on anything bigger than ourselves. We want comfort. We want predictability. We want a beautiful place to worship. We want to look back and rest.

We look back, even in our life of faith. We remember the great hymns that we learned from our grandmother. Those are the ones we want to sing. We cherish the devotional book we used during those mountain-top moments years ago. That is the devotional book we still like, even if it only leads us to the places we have traveled before.

Jaroslav Pelikan was right. Tradition is good. “Tradition is the living faith of the dead.” But tradition pushed too far becomes traditionalism. “Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

The climax of the transfiguration story is not the dazzling light, the majestic figures of Moses and Elijah. The crescendo is when Peter and James and John see, when they see Jesus anew in the present.

This is transfiguration for us: When we trust God enough not to cling to home, but step forward in faith and find Jesus there. When we release the frame of our experience, and invite the Spirit to lead us to Christ in the here and now. When we come down from the mountaintop with eyes and ears wide open. When we risk ourselves in the name of Jesus and discover food and sleep and help and hope and light. When we learn to see, truly see, our Lord and Savior in every moment, in new ways, new times, new places.

Today, on this final Sunday before the season of Lent, we are celebrating with jazz and pancakes. Our ensemble is presenting several arrangements in a different style than what we usually hear on Sunday mornings.

That’s the thing about jazz. No matter what the composition, from a piece as well-known as “Take the A Train” or “All the Things You Are,” jazz never rests. Jazz never stays the same. Jazz never lives in the past. Every time the performers play, they recreate them – every single time. They breathe new life into them as they put heart and soul into the music. No single performance is ever the same.

That’s it. That is our life of faith. The journey of transfiguration never leads us back to the mountain, back to Moses and Elijah and Jesus, back to some past episode. No, it drives us out. It

leads us forward. It invites us to look and listen and discover, with clear eyes, unstopped ears, open hearts.

Every time you and I serve a farmworker, every time we speak up for affordable housing, every time we give our heart to a refugee family, every time we share the good news of Jesus, every time we hold a baby or comfort a child or nurture one of our youth, we are transfigured.

Years ago, when I was fifteen, late one Saturday night, I “borrowed” my parents’ car. Oh, I had no business taking it. I was only fifteen, with only a learner’s permit; I had no driver’s license. But I was restless, and away I went.

I drove out into the countryside, all alone, until I came to Aurelian Springs Church, a small building, waiting silently in the dark for sunrise, for the faithful few dozen to gather for Sunday morning worship. I sat on the hood of the car for a few minutes, looking up at the stars spread across the night sky. Then I walked into the church, open and unlocked in that safe, small little village. I sat on a pew and prayed.

I didn’t know what the future would look like. But I could feel God pulling me forward. I suspected God would be at the very center of it.

Pater and James and John didn’t know what the future would look like. They could not imagine the cross and the empty tomb. But they could see Jesus. They could feel God pulling them forward. They knew God would be at the center of the future.

Today we don’t know the future either. God is a God of surprises. God doesn’t always appear where we expect. But we see Jesus. We can feel God pulling us forward. We know the Lord will be at the very center of our lives.

Can you feel it?