

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Roland Perdue, Interim Pastor  
Sunday, February 19, 2012  
The Sunday of the Transfiguration

## **YOU BLINKED!**

Mark 9:1-13

In *The Gift of Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok, an artist and a rabbi are talking of how one views life; how reality is perceived. The rabbi says we blink. We cannot help it. Therefore, he says, we see between blinks. We see in bits and pieces, fragments between the blinks, and do not know what the world is like during our blinks. We miss what is often right before our eyes, what happened when we blinked. God, on the other hand, does not blink. And so God sees the world whole and unbroken by blinks.

I think we have blinked more than usual whenever this particular Sunday of the Christian Year came around. Transfiguration Sunday is, after all, a Sunday for blinking. Bright lights on a mountain top, memories of Moses receiving the law on Mount Sinai, Jesus' shining clothing reminding all in Mark's community of his coming resurrection, the Voice from the overshadowing cloud whispering that Jesus is the very Son of God. No wonder we blink.

Jesus is seen between blinks as radiant in the thin air on the mountain, his clothing sparkles in dazzling whiteness, bleached almost beyond discernible color. Jesus converses with the legendary figures of Moses and Elijah, both of whom God hid in a cliff in the "Rock of Ages" to protect them as God moved within touch and sight. How could you not blink?

The three disciples Jesus took with him are terrified. What has gone wrong? Why the terror and the inability to internalize the message from God on this Mount of Transfiguration? What have they missed? What have we missed in our blinks?

### **BETWEEN BLINKS**

Try not to blink for a moment. Mark tells his community of the Transfiguration in the context of Jesus healing a man in a permanent state of "blink;" a blind man at Bethsaida. And the Transfiguration follows immediately upon Peter's acknowledgement of Jesus as the Anointed One, the Messiah, and the Christ of God. At this point Jesus begins telling them of his approaching death. Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Most of us blink right there. I am confident the disciples blinked too.

We assume Peter is upset that Jesus is talking about his coming death. Jesus calls him "Satan" indicating Peter really does not know what he is talking about. As the tension continues to mount, Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship and challenges all with the necessity to shoulder our own crosses if we choose to follow Jesus.

And it is then, in the midst of all that, that the Transfiguration takes place. And we sigh in relief

as we see Jesus bathed in glory. Everything is going to turn out all right, after all. Jesus' real destiny is this transfigured state at the top of the mountain. Jesus will be bathed in the glory of the resurrection in a few days, he will shine like the morning sun on Easter Sunday and we would all be happy, safe and filled with the brightness of God's love. God would take away our fear of dying and give us the joyful promise of a resurrected and resurrecting life. And I want to believe that so much that I blinked at all the wrong times. And maybe you blinked as well!

Let me tell you a story which illustrates our point. It is in a novel entitled *Levi's Will*. Two friends, Will and Barefoot, runaway brothers from Amish backgrounds are talking about their lives. Will is recovering from heart surgery and he says, "One day you wake up in the hospital and it hits you all of a sudden that all the stuff you're accomplished doesn't mean as much when you're looking back at it as it did when you were looking forward.

He continues, "You remember that stupid question Harm used to pester everybody with? The thing about the bus?"

Barefoot chuckles. "Yeah. A bus with nine people on it stops and picks up two, lets three off. That one?"

"Right. And he goes through a bunch of stops, adding, subtracting, and everybody sits there counting fingers, trying to keep up with the total."

"And when it's over he says, 'How many stops did the bus make?'" (Everybody's concentrating on the wrong thing).

Will chuckles too. "Yeah. Old Harm. He never gets tired of that joke. But what if it's like that when you die? What if you get to the end of your life and find out that you used all your time getting ready to answer the wrong question?"

Exactly! What if we blinked and concentrated on the wrong thing in the Transfiguration and we missed the newer perspective of reality?

## **BETWEEN BLINKS IN OTHER PLACES**

Let's try to blink in other places as we get another perspective on the Transfiguration.

When Jesus tells Peter and the others about his approaching death, he also tells them about his resurrection. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, **and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.**" And it is then that Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him (8:31).

And on the Mount of Transfiguration, Mark indicates that when Peter wants to make three shrines or booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, it is because Peter "**did not know what to say, for they were terrified** (9:6); that is, Peter, James and John were scared out of their wits.

We blinked. Peter does not want to see his friend and master suffer and die. Oh, of course, he knows, as do we all, that death awaits Jesus and all others. As Archie Bunker used to say, “One out of one dies; that’s life.” And anyone who sets out to go against the status quo of political and religious arrangements is headed for trouble. Peter and the others know this. They know things are getting tight.

If we can keep from blinking another moment or two, we may sense God striding upon the mount in the cloud and saying, “Listen to Jesus.” It is as if God has said, “Your perspective is not reality. You must have your perspectives enlarged. Yes, Jesus will die. He has crucifixion in his future. But he has something else also: resurrection.” And that is what we keep missing; we blink and miss the resurrection.

It is not Jesus’ death that frighten them so, **but his resurrection!** And when they come down the mountain, Mark says, “... they kept the matter to themselves, **questioning what this rising from the dead could mean**” (9:10). Jesus’ resurrection scares the hell out of them!

It is easier to focus on the wrong thing. It is safer. They blink. How many times did the bus stop? If the transfiguration and the resurrection only pertains to our state after death, then we might as well just go on blinking! But what if the resurrection has as much to do with this side of death as it does with whatever follows death and dying?

Don’t blink! Watch Jesus pull the resurrection back into this life, on this side of death and dying. Since we are to be a resurrecting community, we can live like it now. Nothing can ultimately hurt or destroy us. That is what the Transfiguration is really about.

And that is terrifying. At least it was to Peter, John and James. And I have to say, it is ultimately frightening as hell to me too. It means I can live what is left of my earthly life with a lot more courage, confidence, and commitment.

Here between the blinks is a view of a new reality; a reality that transforms our understanding of how the world works and encourages us to engage with Jesus in refashioning the world. The transfiguration of Jesus confuses and terrifies Peter, James and John. And it ought to do the same thing to us. It is not death that confuses. We know death and dying. It stares us in the face daily in Syria, in Charlotte, in our homes, on the highway, hospital wards, around the corner. Death is our daily companion; we know its knock on the door, its parched, yellowing face. And crucifixions were a dime a dozen in Jesus’ day. The rotten bodies of the crucified littered the King’s Highway into Jerusalem. Peter and the others knew what happened to people who talked and acted as did Jesus. Death and dying is nothing new. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

It is life that scares and terrifies us; especially, the resurrected and resurrecting life of Jesus and the new life to which he invites us. “Listen to him!” calls God.

To pick up our crosses, as an intimate and caring community, is to demonstrate the transforming power of divine love, a powerful, assertive love that does not seek to dominate and defeat evil so

much as to challenge, expose, and seek to transform it. Such love, ultimately, carries the day; it alone is truly redemptive and saving (adapted from *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, p. 545). And it will probably get you killed! But, don't blink, for then there is Resurrection if you have the heart for it.

There is a scene near the end of Mark's story which confirms for me this view. Peter and the other disciples have returned home. The women who went to the tomb have not told them of the encounter they had with a young man dressed in white as they stood terrified and frightened gaping at the emptiness of the vacant tomb. He had said, "Do not be **alarmed** (afraid, scared); you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'...**terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid**" (Mark 16:6-8).

I can imagine Peter and some others going about their lives back home in Galilee. They have reunited with their families after the long absence while traveling with Jesus. They are in the beginning stages of trying to repair family relationships. Peter, perhaps, is out near the lake getting his nets ready for an evening of fishing when, over the hill he sees a familiar looking silhouette, and as the figure draws closer and the sun casts its fading light on his face, Peter shouts to the others, "Oh, no! He's back!"

And it is not a shout of joy, but of fear. Fear because Peter realizes it is all true. It is true that might does not make right. True, if you meet a stranger on the road or along Trade Street and she has no coat and you have two you are to give her one of yours. True, the poor are to be cared for. True, an aggressive non-violent presence is the way of God in personal and global conflicts. True, all others are our sisters and brothers. True, their cultures are to be respected and partnership and relational trust are to replace the arrogance of thinking we can take God to anyone rather than follow Jesus into his love for them as well as us. True, that we are to take up our crosses and follow this Jesus into making a just, compassionate and humane society for our sons and daughters and everyone else's daughters and sons. It is all true. And that is terrifyingly frightening.

No, death is not the cause for the fright, fear and the blink. It is the resurrection! And it is all true!

Amen.