

Homily for February 28, 2021 – 2nd Sunday of Lent



As many of you know, over 50 years ago the Church established a 3-year cycle of Sunday Scripture readings. That is to say, we hear the same readings only once every three years. However, every year that pattern is broken when we are given one version or another of the gospel story of the Transfiguration. Maybe one of the reasons we are given this reading every year is that it is so rich in symbolism and meaning we just have to reflect on it every year. This is Mark's version of the

Transfiguration story. Mark, more than any of the other gospel writers, has Jesus often say to those who witnessed a miracle, "Don't tell anyone!" This has been coined "The Messianic Secret." Today's gospel has Jesus almost swearing to secrecy his disciples Peter, James, and John as they come down the mountain: **"he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead."** It is a promise to keep a secret, but not forever—only until the Son of Man is risen. "Risen?" the apostles must have asked themselves, "from what?" Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, to his death, when he makes this pitstop on Mount Tabor, the Mount of Transfiguration. You have to die before you can be risen from the dead. Jesus is telling them not to talk about this powerful experience they had on this mountain until they are on the other side of loss and renewal. If you talk about these things prematurely, that is, without having gone through your own experience of loss and renewal, then you can expect from your listeners resistance, denial, pushback, and endless verbal debate. In short, you listeners will attack your credibility and probably rightly so.

I had coffee this week with a parishioner who is a cancer survivor. She is on the other side of loss and renewal. Jesus does not have to swear her to secrecy. This woman would have gotten it when Jesus said numerous times, ***"The Son of Man must go to Jerusalem, be put to death, and be raised to new life on the third day."*** The disciples on Mount Tabor, Peter, James, and John do not get it. Up until that point, they had yet to go through their own experience of loss and renewal. In fact, every time Jesus brings up the subject of suffering and dying, the subject

of loss (and renewal), they try to change the conversation. Without any real transformation within them, without any dying of their false selves and emergence of their true selves, Jesus just knows these three guys will misuse and misinterpret that experience on the mountaintop.

One of my favorite spiritual writers is Paula D'Arcy. This American writer and counselor, back in 1975 while three months pregnant, got the news that her husband and baby daughter were killed by a drunk driver. She was only 27 at the time and was suddenly thrust into the world of loss, or as some spiritual writers have coined it: the dark night of the soul. She goes on to write at least 14 books that I know of, books about grief and healing, including a book entitled Stars at Night. I have not read that book, but I want to. What I do know about it, is that it is about how she got through the dark night of losing her husband and daughter senselessly. Paula has experienced the world of loss and renewal. She has earned the right to speak without any risk of misusing or misinterpreting what she experienced. She is another one Jesus would not have to swear to secrecy.

Isn't it interesting that this epiphany, this revelation, this transfiguration on the mountain happened not only in a glorious light but more importantly in the darkness of a cloud that overshadowed them? This is about the only time God, the Divine, speaks, and we get to hear it directly. Yet, the voice does not come from the dazzling light but from a dark cloud: ***from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"*** We get to know the mystery of God and the mystery of ourselves through light and darkness, through knowing and not knowing, through things revealed and things hidden. And here most of us are pleading with God to get rid of every cloud of darkness in our lives convinced that God could not possibly be using them to speak to us. Without tending to our own shadow side, the darkness that is in all of us, we will always misinterpret Jesus' message as many of the fundamentalists do. Without believing that God speaks to us in both light and darkness, successes and failures, we will always try to convince Jesus--and ourselves--not go to Jerusalem. Without holding together knowing and not knowing, we will admire Jesus for miracles instead of waiting for the real meaning of the miracle, which is always our own inner transformation.

Most of us would automatically associate Lucifer, the fallen angel, with darkness in contrast to Jesus who is the Light of the World. But, here is the twist. The name Lucifer is Latin for "angel of light" or "light bearer." What? How can this be? If we

think we are being led only by the light, and that we are filled only with light, we are deceiving ourselves; we are living a lie. Satan (or Lucifer) is the deceiver. He never tells the truth and always leads people into his own lies.

Think of it this way: we do not see light *per se*; we see with light. In order to see anything, there has to be some light and some darkness. If everything is light, we are blinded by the light and see nothing. The Pharisees, whom Jesus called hypocrites, thought there was no darkness in them; they thought they were pure light, the standard of everything that was moral and good in the world. What Jesus, the Truth, revealed to them is that they were blind much more than the man born blind ever was. Now we are getting close to understanding why the cloud is in the Transfiguration story. It is there to keep us humble. Without a significant loss, a humbling event significant enough to destabilize the uninitiated ego, we, too, will be convinced that our shadow does not even exist and clouds have nothing to teach us when, in fact, they are the very places God choose to speak to us.

Isn't it equally interesting that Peter, James and John, the only three of the 12 apostles to witness the Transfiguration are the same three chosen, later, to accompany Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane? In the garden while they slept, Jesus called on God in this dark, agonizing moment. In due time, they would have to face their own darkness and loss. Ultimately, they would also experience the Risen Lord. And only then would they understand why Jesus once told them on the Mount of Transfiguration, ***"tell no one what you have seen until the Son of Man is Risen from the dead."***

How do we live with darkness and clouds and even believe that God speaks to us from such places? Two suggestions: 1) Stay close to people who made it through a significant loss in their life and have come through not bitter, angry, or needing to blame, but have come through alive and renewed. 2) Hold fast to the words of St. Paul who says, ***"If God is for us, who could possibly be against us?"*** God is present to us both in the glorious light and in everything that has ever felt like a dark cloud.

Fr. Phil