

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 11, 2024

So this morning we will complete our worship series that's carried us since Epiphany, and we'll do so by moving forward a little bit in the Gospel of Mark. We've been in Mark the entire year so far. Last week we were in Mark 6. This week we move forward just a few chapters to Mark 9. We'll read together at the beginning of verse two. I'm going to change up the end of the text this morning. Your Bulletin says nine; we're going to include 10 in there, verses 2 through 10. Before we read from the Gospel of Mark, let us go to God in prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning, Let your peace fall upon us that our ears might be opened, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming 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. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So Jesus could have told them, told these disciples from the jump when he called them from their nets or from their boats. He could have let them in on who he was, or in the midst of one of the stories that he was telling everybody—one about a mustard seed or a sower or a bushel basket. He could have made himself known after he walked on water or healed the paralytic or fed 4,000 people. He could have revealed himself just a scene earlier in the Gospel of Mark by answering his own question to Peter and the other disciples. "Who do you say that I am?" But he didn't, at least not in the same way that he revealed himself on that high mountain that we read about this morning. What we witness along with Peter and James and John on that high mountain is equal parts dazzling and tender and challenging, dazzling in the brightness that blinds the disciples, tender in the holy confession of God, and challenging in its call to us. Transfiguration, it turns out, gives us great opportunities.

A few weeks ago, I was in Dallas, Texas. It was a Friday morning. I was supposed to spend the day with one of my best buddies. We were going to go play golf. Instead, it was 30 degrees and freezing cold, and so he called me up. We had lived together for three or four years, so we had

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 11, 2024

spent many a rainy afternoon on the couch just watching football, and there's this one show that follows NFL teams throughout the entire season. It's kind of a behind the scenes deal, and he said, "Why don't you come over? We'll watch television and just catch up." I hadn't seen this good friend of mine in a really long time. He's one of my dearest friends, but we had spent some time apart, and that meant that I had missed out on a lot of things that were going on in his life, and not just in his life, but in the life of his children. So we watched football for a little bit and then...and and then he muted it, and we just started talking. I was fortunate enough to be in the hallway just outside the hospital room where his daughter Olivia was born. I was the first friend that got to hold her, and so not being able to see her since before Covid means that I've missed four years of her life, right, and so he was catching me up on what's been going on with Olivia. It turns out that she has quite a gift for sports. She plays soccer and basketball. He told me about this recent game that she had just played the week before. Her team had scored 21 points, which is no small feat for a small youth team. She had scored 19 of those points. I asked if she knew how to pass, and he said that she was just the most gifted, and they would pass her the ball—all her teammates. What became really beautiful to me as he was telling me about his daughter and the journey that her life has taken over the last few years was the look on his face when he was talking about the one that he deeply loves, his first born. He was sharing about her struggles in school and then also about her triumphs in life and on the sports field. I was thinking about that interaction this week when I was reading through this text, because it seems to me that if God is capable of smiling, that this would be the occasion when that smile would break across God's face. If you've ever heard someone speak about another that they deeply love, then you know the look that they hold on their face. There's a certain glow, a certain brightness that can't be held back when we're talking about our beloved. We get to experience that tender moment this morning, but before we get to hear about that, we have to journey back a bit. Jesus doesn't take all the disciples. Jesus takes just a couple of the disciples up to the top of the high mountain, and when they get there, scripture doesn't tell us really how long they spend on the top of that mountain. But what scripture does say is that at some point when they are there, something amazing happens. Jesus is changed before them. What he is wearing, whatever it was, whatever earth colored cloak he might have had on, right, becomes dazzling white, so white that it's very evident that no one on earth could have woven that color together. And then again scripture doesn't tell us how long that happens, how long that Divine experience happens, but then there appear with him, according to the disciples, Elijah with Moses, and they're all talking together—Jesus, Elijah and Moses. Some might describe this and have described this as a Mountaintop experience for the disciples, for Peter, for James, and for John. If you grew up in this church or in a Presbyterian Church USA, then maybe you've had a couple of Mountaintop experiences of your own. Maybe, maybe literally in a place that is sacred to our denomination, a little place in the western corner of North Carolina called Montreat. Maybe you've gone there as a youth leader or as a young person yourself; maybe you've gone there for a worship and music conference that we're going back to this year for the first time in a while. People describe Montreat as a thin place, because it's where seemingly Earth and Heaven are most close together. People often describe in that space having what they would call Mountaintop experiences. Those are beautiful and good, but it's hard to sit with them, because you come down from the mountain. That same difficulty seems to be what Peter is having to navigate this morning, the difficulty of

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 11, 2024

what it looks like to respond to a true experience of God in your life. Scripture tells us Peter's words before it tells us Peter's feelings. Peter's words say, "Jesus, it is good for us to be here. Let me build three dwellings here, three tents, one for you, one for Elijah, one for Moses. Let's just stay right here for a while." And in some ways it's a tender and beautiful sentiment, one that I know that I have shared when I've had a Mountaintop experience. I don't want to leave that place where I'm experiencing God. But then scripture tells us about where that word comes from. It says that Peter did not know what to say because he, along with the disciples, was terrified, it was actually out of fear, out of confusion, that Jesus hears these words from his disciple Peter. "Let's just stay here for a while." And in some ways I have a great deal of empathy for Peter. When something happens to me that seems beyond description or beyond explanation, when a Divine experience interrupts my life, I'm often unsure of how to respond to it. And I'm also a doer, so I want to busy myself with some other activity. Peter seems to be doing that here, "I'm not sure how to respond to what I've just seen and what I'm experiencing. I'll build some houses here. Let me pitch a couple of tents, and we can just stay for a while in this place." Our tendency as humans is to want to do something to make ourselves useful instead of being willing to simply sit in the amazingness of an experience of God. We have that tendency, because to simply sit in it is often more difficult. And not just that, but like Montreat, we tend to worship where we are when, in reality, God's got plans for us to pursue in other places. We tend to...to instead of deify the experience that we have just had, we tend to make holy the place where we had it. So we say that we most experience God in this place or that place instead of focusing on the experience of God itself. And just as Peter is saying, "Let me build some stuff with my hands and make myself useful," a cloud comes across that mountaintop, and from it a voice speaks. This isn't the first time that the voice of God has spoken in the Gospel of Mark. In fact it's an echo in this ninth chapter of Mark of the first chapter of Mark, when upon Jesus's baptism there is a voice from Heaven that speaks to Jesus and says, "You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased." In this case, though, the voice isn't meant just for Jesus, it is meant for the disciple. It is meant for us. "This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we get all caught up in the dazzling light and white garments that Jesus has and a cloud descending. We think that this Sunday and that this scene is about what we can see, but God seems to be saying to the disciples, "It's not about what you're seeing right now, however dazzling the white of the garment is, however crazy it might seem for Elijah and Moses to also be here. It's not about what you are seeing. It is about what you are listening to, and you need to be listening to this one who is my son, my beloved." That becomes important because God knows something that we get to read about in scripture just before. Listening is something that the disciples are struggling with. They are unsure of how to truly hear the voice of Jesus and to respond to it. In Mark chapter 8:31 the text says, "Then Jesus 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 3 days rise again." He said all this, scripture says, quite openly, but then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Jesus. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on Divine

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 11, 2024

things but on human things.” Jesus has told them, is speaking to them, about what is about to happen just a chapter before, and they won't listen. Jesus is unpacking for them this journey that he is about to go on, that's about to have a significant shift in its tenor. There is going to be suffering, there is going to be death, and then there will be new life; but they don't want to hear it. I don't think we do either, more often than not. “If you want to skip ahead to the new life thing, we'll listen to that;but if you want to get into the depths of that whole death and suffering thing, we've had enough,thank you.” Often, we close our ears to what that might look like in our lives and in the world as well, and yet the voice of God speaks from heaven and says, “Listen to him. There is wisdom in what he is sharing with you, divine message in the words that he speaks. You think this scene is about what you can see. I'm telling you it's about what he is saying to you.” And it's one thing for us to say well just listen better, and it's another thing to actually practice that.

Yesterday afternoon, cold rainy. This is a weird time for people who like to turn on sports in the afternoon. If you're not a big college basketball fan, right, there's not a whole lot going on on a Sunday, or excuse me, a Saturday afternoon or even a Saturday morning, and so the house gets a little quieter,right, and...and if you don't have, if you're not taking kids to basketball games or anything else or have dogs running around...gets a little quiet. I found myself yesterday sitting in the quietness of my house and saying, “Oh, we don't need this, so I'm going to turn on the music really really loud, right, and I'm going to do my chores that I need to do, but there's going to be noise kind of filling it up, and then when I'm tired of listening to the music, I'm going to switch that over to the book that I've been listening to and let the author read it to me as I go about the rest of my labor. I'm going to put on the TV just in the background. I just need a little bit of noise to distract me from my own thoughts.” I had a friend in seminary describe themselves, describe their mind saying, “My mind is a dangerous place to go. I never like like to go there by myself.”And when it's really quiet, we might find ourselves going into those spaces, right? We do all sorts of things, we do all sorts of things that distract us from truly listening. And you might, you might have had a really busy Saturday. For you it might be the time that you wake up in the middle of the night, when, instead of just sitting there in the quiet, you decide to grab your phone and start scrolling, right? It might be the time in your car, which might be the only time you have by yourself, where you decide to turn up the music really loud. “I don't need to sit with these thoughts too much.” Truly listening is...is difficult work. That's why I think this message from God is so important and so timely for us. God knows what the disciples are about to experience. God knows that the next several weeks in their journey with Jesus are going to look a whole lot different than the previous couple of years. God knows that there are things coming their way that they will not want to experience; but if they would, and God knows this, if they would simply listen to Jesus when he speaks about what is to come, he tells them the whole story. He does not say to them in the text then the son of man will undergo great suffering and be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes and be killed. He doesn't just say that alone. He says after 3 days he will rise again. He doesn't just say it to the disciples. He says it quite openly. Scripture says to pretty much anyone who will listen there is going to be great suffering; there is going to be rejection; there will be death; but there will be new life as well. Wednesday we inaugurate our Lenten journey together. If you haven't signed up for a Lenten lectionary group

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 11, 2024

or lectio group, I hope that you'll go on Realm and do it this afternoon. We've got five of them across the city that you can be a part of. We're making them as convenient as we possibly can. We're doing that because we believe that the Journey of Lent is actually supposed to be a really intentional journey towards suffering and towards death, that as people of faith we don't have to be afraid to sit in those places. We don't have to busy ourselves with many things. We can actually just abide in that place because we trust and we believe that new life is coming. So I guess my challenge for you this morning and as you begin the Lenten journey is more of a question. What is the word that God is speaking to you right now that you are drowning out with other noise or unwilling to listen to because it makes you uncomfortable? What is the word that God is speaking to you right now that you have drowned out with all sorts of noise or you just don't want to listen to because it's not the direction you want to go? Within the liturgical calendar we get this season where we get to Incline our ears to hear the voice of God speaking into our lives. I wonder if God is speaking to you about a relationship. I wonder if God is speaking to you about your vocation. I wonder if God is speaking to you about your faith or about your involvement here at Idlewild? I wonder if God is speaking to you about how you are called to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly? I wonder if God is speaking to you about your parenting or God is speaking to you about your marriage? I wonder what is the word that God is speaking to you that you won't be quiet enough to listen to?

The cloud descends upon the mountain shutting out all the other senses so that all the disciples can do in that moment is listen, and I wonder what it might be like for you to make space for that, in this season of Lent to listen more intently to what Jesus is trying to speak into your life? It might be a word that feels convicting and heavy. It might be one that considers suffering. It might be one that speaks of something coming to an end. But what the voice tells us to do is to listen to Jesus to completion. And that means if we're listening, then we'll also hear a word of new life. May we listen with inclined ears in this season, and may we trust that God is offering something is full of life and hope. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.