

Seeing Jesus

Sermon by
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It's a time of transition. We are going from one season to the next, preparing ourselves for the challenges we will face.

Do you think I'm talking about the end of Epiphany and the start of Lent? No - I'm talking about Spring Training.

Spring Training is, of course, not the official start of the baseball season. That comes in a little more than a month. But Spring Training is the time when major league baseball players get ready for opening day. As such it is a time when our imaginations are given permission to run wild with hope. For me, as a die-hard New York Met fan, there is great solace in the fact that the bullpen hasn't blown a lead yet. For you Cleveland Indians fans, there is equal solace in that no one has gone on the disabled list yet. Everybody starts off fresh and new with hopes that, come October, our team will be on top.

But this year all of that has been tempered somewhat. This year the talk of Spring Training has not been who has the best bullpen or the best bench, but who's been using steroids? This was especially true when New York Yankees star Alex Rodriguez admitted using steroids when he was with another team some time ago. Those of us who are Yankee haters cannot afford to be holier-than-thou. This is an issue not just for our favorite teams, but for our young people who look up to these athletes as role models. We are now seeing the players who have used steroids for who they are.

In a way, that's good. The problem is being confronted, and people are being held accountable not only for going around the rules, but also for doing something that will hinder their long-term health. That's the way it is with transition times. It allows us to see things for what they are, to see people for who they are, and to start off a new time of life with a determination to live differently. We want to do this because when we see who we are and when we see the world the way it is, we recognize that things have not always been what they are supposed to be, that we have often not been who we want to be. Transition time means we get to start again, and hope springs up, and life is renewed.

It's a time of transition. And now I will talk about the transition from the time of Epiphany – the coming of the Light of the world to all people – to the time of Lent, the time of considering our frail humanity and how it was that God took on this frailty and overcame it with love. It is a time of transition, a time of change, a time of switching gears as we move into Lent this week when we gather for our annual Ash Wednesday service. It's a time of transition, and in that transition we see who we are as we come to receive the ashes and hear the words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Gloomy words, and we Christians are often really good at being gloomy. But necessary words, necessary because these words remind us who we are.

And yet these words transcend our gloominess because they point to another reality; the reality that dustiness is not God's ultimate intention for us, but glory.

In this time of transition we come to the Biblical story we always come to on this Sunday, the story of the Transfiguration. If this is a time of renewed honesty, let's start practicing that right away and fess up that this is a strange story. Other Biblical accounts may draw us deeper into the human experience, giving us some handles on how to live our lives better. But this story is just plain weird. It is not something we have experienced; we haven't been on the mountaintop, we haven't seen anyone bleached blindingly white, we haven't seen anyone rapping with people long dead, we haven't heard a voice out of a cloud. We haven't done any of that.

But through all of that, Peter and James and John get to see Jesus for who he was – and is. He is the glorified and exalted Son of God, the One who is beyond us while at the same time being the One who is with us, God with us. In this scene they see Jesus for who he is. They will need that in the days to come, for after this point in Mark's Gospel there will be days of opposition, days of testing, and later days of betrayal, denial and death.

It's interesting to note, though, their actions as they see him for who he is. Peter blurts out something about building tents, about keeping this mountaintop experience secure. That may sound silly because we are distanced from this event. How many of us want to build tents or houses around experiences in which we have seen Jesus for who he is, rather than following Jesus where he leads us.

But in the midst of his fear, a cloud overshadows them and a voice comes from the cloud. It utters the words from Jesus' baptism – "This is my own dear Son..." Like I said, we get to see Jesus as he really is. And the voice from heaven proclaims that. But then the voice moves from seeing to hearing: "Listen to him," the voice says.

If we think those two senses are different, remember the times when you have seen someone for who they are and what that did to your ability to really listen to them. If someone let you down, disappointed you, betrayed you before others, that would make their word pretty shaky with you from then on. But if someone stood up for you, stood with you, if someone helped you out in a tough time, if someone showed you the love of Christ in a special way, then whatever that person said would take on added meaning and added weight. When we see people for who they really are it affects the level at which we hear them.

And when we see Jesus for who he is that affects how we hear him. If we see him as just a nice guy, a pretty good teacher, kind of a cool dude who stuck it to the authorities, that affects how we hear him. But if we see him as the Son of God, of God in the flesh, as the Savior of the world and the eternal guide for our lives, that also affects how we hear him.

But what do we hear? Jesus said a lot. What is it that the Voice from the cloud wants us to hear from Jesus? What he says in verse 9, about being silent until after his resurrection? Well, perhaps – but I think there is something else going on here. To get at that you have to go

back in this story, back a few verses; back to when Jesus and the disciples were in Caesarea Philippi and Peter made his confession that Jesus is the Christ; with Jesus praising Peter but then telling them what that meant. Not military conquest and nationalistic glory like they were expecting. But suffering, rejection and death. They didn't get it then, and we still don't get it. Aren't you supposed to sock it to your enemies, Jesus, which also happen to be my enemies? Aren't you supposed to really zing those faithless people, those folks who are always putting your church down? Aren't you going to make everybody who didn't worship you feel real bad?

No – what Jesus tells us is his story. And when Jesus tells us his story, he is also telling us our own story. It is the story of life, of hearing teachings of love, of acceptance, of worship. He is telling us stories of death, death as the end of life and the end of hope. But he doesn't leave us there. He also tells us about resurrection – about the renewal of life, the renewal of hope, the renewal of our deepest selves.

Last week I was doing some reading for my course work on a book called *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age*. It was written by Brad Kallenberg, a professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton. Kallenberg was writing about the ways that stories are told and how they can be heard when they are seen lived out in the lives of people. He mentioned that often we measure things by their effectiveness, but then he offered an alternative:

“John Howard Yoder suggests that the relationship between actions we take and eventual outcomes is one not of cause and effect but of death to resurrection. Instead of evaluating human actions on the basis of their utility, we can regard our actions as deeds capable of embodying and reflecting the form of Jesus' story.”

He then went on to tell his own story, which sounded like the stories of a lot of people I have heard lately. He was finished with his doctoral work and he went looking for a job. But post after post closed on him. He went to conferences, attended seminars hoping to make contacts and get interviews. But nothing came. He wrote:

“Although I had taught at seven institutions in five cities in two states and two countries, I couldn't suppress a sadness in my spirit and a profound temptation to doubt myself. But I found solace in the hope that God intended the pattern of my life to conform to the whole pattern of Jesus – to his life, death and resurrection – not merely to his death. Although I could not engineer a happy outcome to my job search, it dawned on me that in trying to remain faithful to Jesus during the search, it was right for me to expect resurrection. I knew I could not predict in advance what resurrection would look like, but I wrote to a friend that it was fitting, on the basis of the story of Jesus' resurrection, for me to hope that in ten years I would be able to look back and say, 'Hah! Resurrection!'”

Kallenberg went on to tell about how he did experience resurrection when a post which had been previously closed opened up for him. But the story is not just his. We are all called to listen to Jesus, to listen to his story, and to how his story is also our own – the story of life, death and resurrection. We need to hear that story as we experience so much death around

us; death of jobs, death of dreams, death of hopes. In our church and in the church universal, we experience death of expectations, death of influence, death of relationships, in addition to the physical deaths we have to endure.

But the story of Jesus does not end with death. God has the final word, and the final word is – resurrection. There is always renewal of life, even in the midst of death. God is working for life to be renewed in our lives and in the lives of those around us, and throughout the whole created world. In the midst of our time of fear and death, we need to hear the voice from the cloud more than ever – “This is my own dear Son. Listen to him!”

For we have seen Jesus for who he really is – the One who leads us to that place where his story becomes our own; to that place where resurrection is not only possible, but expected. Amen.

Bible Text is Mark 9:2-9.

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