

2 Kings 2:1-12  
Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration of the Lord  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
February 11, 2018

## **A Glimpse into the Future**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

The selection of the Old Testament text from 2 Kings is based on the occurrence of Elijah in the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration. Also, the story of Elijah's ascension to heaven foreshadows the ultimate ascension of Jesus that is anticipated in the Transfiguration. Listen to these words from 2 Kings 2:1-12...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

On this closing Sunday of Epiphany Mark offers a glimpse of the glory of Christ in his story of the Transfiguration. We hear an echo of Jesus' baptism with the voice from heaven and Jesus identified as God's Son. But here the voice speaks not to Jesus, rather to the disciples. And for these disciples who had been hearing talk of Jesus' death, the corner of the curtain is lifted, and they are granted a glimpse into the future. Listen to these words from Mark 9:2-9...

### *Sermon*

The 1985 film, *Back to the Future*, was a highly imaginative science fiction movie starring Michael J. Fox. Remember the eccentric scientist who constructed a machine capable of achieving the dream of traveling through time. A teenage boy uses the machine to journey to his hometown as it was in the 1950's, before he was born. There he meets his parents before they were married and discovers what they were like in *their* awkward teenage years. He dazzles the people in his town with the unknown sport of skateboarding, and he even manages to introduce Chuck Berry to the sound of the as-yet-unwritten "Johnny B. Goode." Signs of the 50's quaintness abound, soda bottles whose caps will not twist off; a service station with a platoon of

crisply uniformed attendants who welcome each car to check the oil, clean the windshield, and sweep off the floor mats. Someone even asks the young man, who is wearing a 1980's down-filled vest, why he is wearing a life preserver.

But for all its warm frivolity, the movie does ponder one serious theme: how possessing knowledge of the future could create a sense of responsibility in the present. Before moving back in time, the boy has been warned not to attempt to alter the future in any way. Indeed, as the plot unfolds, he has to work hard to insure that the future he has already seen and lived, does in fact develop. For example, his teenage mother and father are having difficulty developing a romantic relationship, and the boy has to employ every ounce of his inventiveness to insure that the conditions are created which will lead to their mutual attraction, eventual marriage, and paradoxically, his own birth. Because he knows the future, he bears its burden and is compelled to work for its fulfillment. The movie is playful, but the insight is a serious one. Knowledge of the future creates responsibility in the present.

Robert Capon was an Episcopal priest well-known for his books and lectures on human relationships. He was an elderly man, and the kind of open spirit who welcomed questions on any subject. Once he was asked, "what do you say in your prayer before a sermon?" He thought for a moment, then replied, "I view everything from the point of view of my death, especially the sermon I am about to preach." At first his answer may seem strange, even morbid. But upon further reflection it can be said that his response was not of dread, but of wisdom. The fact that he would die gave shape to his remaining days. Instead of simply crossing off the blocks on the calendar, his knowledge of the future had placed upon him the responsibility of making the remaining time matter. The psalmist said:

So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart. (90:12)

So Robert Capon wasn't just counting his days left, he was using them wisely.

In his book *Heading Toward Omega*, Kenneth Ring writes about the meaning of near-death experiences to people who have them. Many report a reluctance to go back to life as we know it, but understand that they must, that there are still necessary things to be accomplished. Some of the most startling descriptions however, revolve around what they consider necessary. Most people having such an experience report that the accomplishments they had thought most important were of hardly any significance at all. It was the amount of love they shared—expressed in even the smallest ways—that was the most meaningful accomplishment of a lifetime. So now the entire meaning of life is seen through a new lens.

Well, the transfiguration of Jesus is a glimpse into the future. It is not just a glimpse into any future; it is a clear vision of the ultimate future, God's future, and as such, it can create for all disciples of Jesus a new orientation to life. The event occurs in the middle of Jesus' ministry, indeed, almost literally in the middle of Mark's gospel. It's a striking account, filled with mystery, awe, and symbolism. Peter, James, and John are apart with Jesus on a high mountain, the symbolic place of revelation. Jesus' garments begin to shine with a brilliant whiteness, the sign of God's glorious presence, the "Shekinah." Jesus converses with great Old Testament figures: Moses of the Law, and Elijah of the Prophets. Then suddenly, there is only Jesus, who fulfills both the law and the prophets, and there is the voice of God, which spoke at Jesus' baptism, now again declaring him to be the "Son of God."

Mark tells us that in the middle of the experience Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Sometimes students of this text say that what Peter wanted to do was to preserve the moment, to freeze time at the peak of this mountaintop experience. Maybe so, but there is more to it than

that. The commentator David Nineham has pointed out that Peter's suggestion of building booths was itself a recognition that he was face-to-face with the future. The Jewish Feast of Booths had come to mean, not only a remembrance of the days when God dwelled with his people in tents in the wilderness, but also it meant a looking forward to the day when God and his people, people of all nations, would again "tabernacle" together. Peter looked at the shining appearance of the glorified Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah, and he assumed that this long-expected day had finally come. The future had arrived. "Let us build the booths."

But Peter was mistaken. The future had been glimpsed but it had not yet fully arrived. The transfiguration occurs in the middle of Jesus' ministry. There was still ahead a journey into the valley full of dark shadows, disputes to be settled, rejection to be faced, burdens to be carried, denials to be heard, suffering to be endured, and a cross to be borne. But the future had been seen, and now it could shape the present.

That day on the mountain Peter saw into the future, and what he saw was that Jesus is the Lord of time and eternity. But now Peter must go back to a valley full of illness, danger, and suffering, with the awareness that after what he had seen, serving any other than this Lord was unthinkable.

In Jesus Christ we have seen what God's future is like, and Mark rightfully calls that the "good news." But Mark also preserves the other side of that truth as well. We are now responsible to the future we have seen. We must live today in the light of that tomorrow, even if that means scorn, sacrifice, and suffering.

It may not be easy to resist the offer of a gospel of success, an invitation to what Reinhold Niebuhr once described as a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross. But reject it we must. For that is not the gospel proclaimed in the New Testament.

Lutheran Pastor Richard John Neunaus once described Christian people as ambassadors of a disputed sovereignty—ambassadors who have arrived at court too soon. We have seen the future in which Jesus is Lord, but we are called to serve him in a time when his Lordship is hidden and seems in doubt. We know that the future belongs to the Prince of Peace, and so we work for peace in a war-torn world. We know that one day justice will roll down like waters, and so we work today for that justice. We have seen the risen Christ, and we know that in him the image of God in humanity has been restored. Therefore, we work today for the poor, the outcast, the sick.

It is an awesome thing to have seen the future, but the future we have seen is God's future, and it is sure. One day Peter's wish will be fulfilled, and the booths will be built. In another glimpse into the future, John the Evangelist says in Revelation

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
"See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away." (21:3-4)

And so we celebrate Holy Communion, for as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we do show the Lord's death until he comes again.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.