

Sermon Text for February 27, 2022

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Mark 9:2-8

“The transfiguration”

On Friday I went some of the leaders who are going on the Italy Mission trip to go and see Godspell since one of our youth who is going on the trip is involved in the musical. I remember when I came to the US in 1976 that this was one of those first impression moments as I saw Jesus and his disciples dressed up as clowns and speaking in ways that I could understand and addressing issues that were current. It was one of those times that words of Jesus became understandable to me. Throughout the decades Godspell has been able to get the same consistent message across. In the 70's it was flower children, in the 80's and 90's in the face of the cold war, today, it was technology and social media. But the message remained the same.

Both of our Scriptures that we look at today demand that as we live in a complex and changing world that we listen to message of Jesus Christ which was the same yesterday, today, and will be the same tomorrow as well. We often think that the message of Christ changes because we change and the environment around us changes, and the world changes, so we have to change God's message to keep up with what is happening in the world.

But today we see we are simply commanded to listen to him. But we see that listening, hearing the voice of God is not enough. We must also remember what we have heard and implement what we have heard in our own lives so that Jesus' message will impact us and those around us. The message is the same, God is the same, but do we hear and do we remember? Some think there is a need for a new revelation. There are so called prophets going around, which are for some reason very popular in this country, who feel as if they need to speak a new word.

The revelation of Jesus is sufficient, it is enough for us today. There is no need for a new revelation. Just listen to Jesus, even as the context changes, his message never does. It is our desires, our own understanding which leads us to think primarily on human things, Jesus leads us to think on divine things and remember them. Let's read.

READ

It was August of 1991 and I was in a bus with a group from the National Council of Churches and a handful of youth from Moscow. We were just finishing up a month of intensive work in Smolensk, Russia and other parts of Russia around Moscow in helping to rebuild churches after they had been given back to the Russian Orthodox Church by the Communist Soviet Union. As we approached Moscow the driver quickly pulled over to the side of the road

and a line of tanks started to pass us. 30 minutes later as they were still passing us we huddled around a radio and heard on the BBC that Gorbachev has fallen ill and that the communist hardliners had taken over Moscow and were looking to reassert themselves.

We were supposed to stay in Moscow for 5 days but it became apparent that it was not safe for us to do. We waited another hour and a half as a line about 5 miles long of tanks were stationed in the city and the outskirts. We found a place to stay outside of Moscow and we stayed there a few days until it became safe for us to go back in. The next two evenings I spent them with my new friends from Moscow that I had made over the past month and we drove around the city at night watching as statue after statue was pulled down. That time in my life I will never forget, it has been etched in my mind forever.

It was a time that I was able to see history play itself out, when something definitely new was taking place. Being with people my age who lived in the city and understanding what was taking place back then helped me to contextualize the reality from a perspective that was not my own, and certainly not from a Western perspective. It is difficult for us at times to understand what is happening in the world, or even in the next county over, if all we know and if all we care about is our own context and what is happening in our own neighborhood.

When Moses is leading the people of Israel they are facing a newness much like the people of Moscow faced in 1991. The old has been taken away, their way of living in Egypt was no more, a new context has come into place, but Moses is telling the people in Deuteronomy, you have to remember what has brought you here. You have to remember, who has brought you here. If there is one thing I want you to remember, and this one thing will carry you for the rest of your lives if you do remember it, is this: look at vs.5...

You remember this and then make sure you pass it on to those who come after you. Don't let anyone in your family ever forget this. Take steps, concrete steps to remind yourself of this fact, that I am the Lord your God. Bind it on your heads, put these words everywhere. Make it your screen saver, put it all around your house, wear it on your clothes. Whatever it takes. Because this truth will never change, even as you go through the most significant changes in your life and in the life of your nation, this will not change.

You see, God reveals himself to us over time to remind us of who He is. He doesn't reveal Himself in order to do something new, that was already done in Jesus, but to give us our bearings back as the world changes around us. This reminder of who God is, is seen in our New Testament reading as well. We find ourselves this Sunday, again providentially, having read

Mark 9 which contains the story of the Transfiguration which is the Sunday that we are celebrating today. See how God made that happen, it wasn't me, I'm just following along.

Let's turn there and set the context a bit. We find ourselves once again noticing that Scripture is not kind to Peter in some places, and this is one of those places. He has been on a cold streak. Just the chapter earlier, in 8:32 Jesus calls Peter Satan, which is not a term of endearment in case any of you were wondering. So Jesus leaves his main body of disciple behind and takes three of them, Peter, James and John up a mountain. Jesus going up mountains is not unusual. When we go to Italy this summer we will be doing a Vacation Bible School that I love to do in Naples because where we are going there is the imposing presence of Vesuvius that is always in our sight and so our theme is always Go, Tell it on the mountain.

We see him often leave the crowds and go and pray. We see this happening to other people in the Bible as well, especially in times of stress and anxiety. Moses as the people disobey God goes up the mountain to meet with God. Elijah who is fleeing from the king and queen goes up to a mountain to seek out the presence of God and finds it in a still small voice. They both encounter God on a mountain at a time in their ministry when discouragement was highest. They needed God's voice to not only assure them for the present, but also to propel them to the future.

Jesus was in a similar situation here. He had just told his disciples his plans and the process to achieve those plans which involved suffering and dying. God meets him on the mountain and sends Moses and Elijah to be with him and they are in conversation, almost unaware, and certainly not paying any attention, to the three disciples who were present there. Peter decides that it is his responsibility to do something. Good thing we are here Jesus, we can take care of it from here. We'll just go ahead and build a few booths then we can keep you here, kind of like a zoo, but different.

There are times in our lives that the context around us changes so much, like the pandemic, that we assume and think that because so much has changed around us, God is also forced to change, and we can be instruments of that change. It is as if our presence in any way increases the legitimacy of God and God's work. As if without our presence God is somehow weakened and without purpose or meaning. God works regardless of our status. It is up to us to remember how God works, why God works, and through whom God works. It is not up to us to force the hand of God to adapt to our context. We must listen to God within our changing context as he continues to speak to us in a consistent, unchanging way.

Now, to Peter's credit, the Scripture does say that he was terrified. When we are afraid we make poor decisions. This Scripture in Mark, the transfiguration, is our Shema in many ways. As the cloud swirls around us we often feel as if we have to talk or act in at least some way, but God says to us, Look at Jesus, he is my beloved, listen to him. Listen to Jesus. Well, what did Jesus say, a lot. Our actions, our thoughts, our approach to today has to be based upon what Jesus did, how he did it, and what he taught, and not a bastardized combination of Christianity and nationalism that leads to what we are seeing in Ukraine with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church. That is something we need to be aware of, since we are not too far from that reality ourselves.

Today, this sermon is about listen to God's message that is unchanging and that is right in front of us. War is a reflection of human sin, of not listening to God. God requires of us a heart that cares. This church has to care because we are connected to Christians all over the world. Jesus is a God of peace, that has not changed, and that will never change. May we reflect that desire for peace in our own lives. Amen.