

“Beyond the Veil”

Sermon – February 11, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Quinquagesima [kwin-kwa-JES-ah-mah]. It is a word that comes from Latin meaning fiftieth. While not commonly used these days, it is in reference to this Sunday, which is fifty days before Easter Day inclusive of that Sunday and today.

Contrast it with Pentecost, which comes from Greek meaning fiftieth, and refers to the fifty days after Easter when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles in Jerusalem and concludes the season of Easter.

When the Revised Common Lectionary was created in 1992 today the gospel reading for this Sunday was chosen to be the transfiguration of Jesus, so we traditionally call today Transfiguration Sunday.

But unlike Pentecost, today does not belong to a season like Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter. It stands in Ordinary Time on threshold of Lent, which starts in three days on Ash Wednesday.

It represents a hint of who Jesus really is 50 days before we see the full realization. It is like looking through veil—you see it but not entirely.

Mark has three revelatory—apocalyptic—events in his gospel: the baptism of Jesus in the beginning, the transfiguration of Jesus in the middle, and the crucifixion of Jesus at the end.

You can view these as the three pillars of Mark’s gospel because at each one Jesus is declared God’s son. The first two times by God and the last one at the crucifixion by the centurion. And in Mark no one else is designated “God’s Son.”

In fact, in Mark, as in Matthew and Luke, the only times voice of God is heard is at Jesus’ baptism and at the transfiguration.

At the baptism in Mark the voice speaks directly to Jesus saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved.” In today’s passage, however, the voice speaks directly to the three disciples saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved.”

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And then comes the kicker, “Listen to him.” Listen to him. It is one thing to admire the Messiah; to obey him is something else.

Note this is taking place six days after Jesus tells them how he must suffer, die, and rise again, and to follow him you must deny yourself and take up your cross. Somewhat disjointedly you’ll hear that passage in two weeks.

In Mark’s account of the baptism, it’s not clear that anyone else sees the heavens slashed apart or the Holy Spirit diving into Jesus.

The Transfiguration is a very different kind of a revealing, however. Jesus becomes a beacon, like a lighthouse planted in the middle of the desert. And the heavenly voice addresses all the witnesses: Peter, James, and John.

We might use the words “transfigure” and “transform” interchangeably, but there is a helpful distinction to keep in mind.

To be *transfigured* is to be changed in outward form or appearance. Jesus’ transfiguration does not alter who he is but gives to those who see the changed appearance a new understanding of him because they see him outwardly in a different light.

When we speak of *transformation*, we tend to mean a complete or essential change in composition or structure. Jesus on the mountain with Moses and Elijah is not transformed—that is, changed inwardly—but transfigured before his disciples—that is, shown to be other than assumed. He is not made to have a new essential self but an appearance that conveys his standing in the company of Israel’s greatest prophets, Moses and Elijah.

Up till now, the disciples had seen Jesus perform all kinds of miracles and had taught as one with authority.

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But despite Peter’s declaration that Jesus was the Messiah, they still saw Jesus more as a super human.

But the vision the disciples behold in the Transfiguration removes the veil of Jesus’ humanness to reveal his divinity: wondrous, frightening, powerful, unexpected, and rich, connecting all the ages, giving enlightenment. His external appearance is utterly changed.

Whereas Moses’ face shined when God spoke to him on the mountain such that Moses needed to wear a veil so as not to frighten the people, for Jesus his entire appearance shines.

But only for a moment. Then it was back to “normal.” Just Jesus, Peter, James, and John.

And yet, despite that mountaintop experience, in the very next chapter James and John try to claim a place at Jesus’ side when he comes into his glory. They don’t understand the price of that glory, even when Jesus tries to remind them. They aren’t listening. And many today are not either.

The church has a responsibility: to listen to God’s Son. That listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure and the view is stunning.

The church must listen to the voice of God’s Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross. We are not called to have power over others but to rise up as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and give life to others, especially those who are neglected by the powerful.

Perhaps more fittingly than for any of the other gospels, Mark’s transfiguration story stands as a transition between the Sundays of Epiphany, with the progressive revelation of the power and presence

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of the good news of God’s kingdom in this Jesus, and the season of Lent, with its progressive focus on the journey of Jesus to suffering and the cross.

In the Temple in Jerusalem the innermost part of the sanctuary was the “holy of holies” and was separated by a veil from the rest of the sanctuary. Much later it was taken as referring to mysterious division between this world and the next. So, to go “beyond the veil” was to pierce that divide.

On Good Friday Jesus will pierce that divide and the veil will be torn from top to bottom. And so, 50 days from now we will celebrate Christ’s rising that conquers death.

The disciples saw the Transfiguration, heard the voice of God, and were told to listen to Jesus. And yet they still stumbled, still had a veil over their understanding until the Resurrection.

The Corinthians, among others, also had a veil over their understanding, looking to proclaim themselves and not Christ.

We are called to pierce that veil,

Jesus expelled darkness and testified to the truth of God. God’s glory is shining in the face of Jesus Christ because of that. Like the Corinthians we can dwell in light when we participate in Christ Jesus. That is the way to light.

As Paul writes 2 Corinthians 3:16, “But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.