**Last Sunday after Epiphany Year B 2015 Sermon**

**Mark 9:2-9**

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 white, such as no one on earth could bleach 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 make three dwellings, 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.

*Much of what I share with you today comes from Dr. David Lose, “…in the Meantime” blog, “Transfiguration B: There Is No Plan”, Posted: 09 Feb 2015.*

In the past, when I have been asked what I think the function of a Christian minister is, I have often responded that I think that one of the principal functions of *any* religious leader is to bring meaning; to interpret the vagaries and vicissitudes of human life in light of God’s saving grace, in such a way as to make sense of our world and our place in it. Elton Trueblood, physician, doctor of philosophy and chaplain at Harvard and Stanford, wrote: “Men and women can bear hardship, poverty, physical hunger and pain, but there is one thing which they cannot bear very long, and that is meaninglessness. If they are not provided with meaning in *one* connection, they will seek it in another.” (*The Future of the Christian*)

We are always seeking to interpret life events so that they will fit into the framework of our particular view of the world, and make sense within our current mindset, our current beliefs and values, our current consciousness.

Professor David Lose believes that “What drives our desire to find meaning… is that meaning provides stability. It offers us the assurance that the world is intelligible, orderly, and has value. **Apart** from this, the world seems not simply meaningless or chaotic, but hostile and even uninhabitable. And so we are born ‘meaning-makers,’ always seeking to lay some imaginative order on the various events and circumstances of our lives, often by fitting those events into a larger and meaningful ***plan***.” (…*in the Meantime* blog, “Transfiguration B: There Is No Plan”, Posted: 09 Feb 2015)

I think this can help us understand Peter in today’s Gospel reading.

We all know the story of the Transfiguration. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and suddenly, as Mark describes it, Jesus is transfigured before them, and his clothes become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could ever bleach them. And there appears to them Elijah and Moses, who are talking with Jesus. Then Peter says to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three booths, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

If Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were to suddenly appear right here in front of us, dazzling white, I daresay **we** might be just a little bit fearful.

What Peter does, as I suspect ***any*** of us would do, is immediately interpret what he is experiencing in terms of a conceptual framework he is familiar with. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets foretell the coming “Day of the Lord”, the day of Divine Judgment and Deliverance. Now, according to Jewish tradition, God was supposed to inaugurate the anticipated “Day of the Lord” during the Jewish Feast of Booths (see Zechariah 14:16-21). And so when Peter sees his Lord transformed and now accompanied by Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the law and prophets, he can only think that the “Day of the Lord” has come. He makes the connection to the ancient prophesy, fits it into his framework of understanding, and tries to take his place amid its drama. If the Day of the Lord is inaugurated during the Feast of Booths, perhaps the best thing to do is build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

But you see the problem: As is our human tendency, Peter instantly and instinctively tries to make sense of, and find meaning in, what he is seeing. Neurons are frantically firing throughout his brain trying to find the right cubby-hole in his brain to put this experience in. Peter – who throughout the Gospels represents us – tries to put this overpowering Mystery into his old, familiar conceptual framework, thereby confining its meaning to his own limited and totally inadequate understanding of what is happening. But it won’t work. As Jesus said, there must be new wineskins to hold new wine.

“Sometimes,” writes Dr. Lose, our “desire to find meaning isn’t helpful, particularly when we *impose* our meaning on someone else’s circumstances or struggles. Each of us has probably cringed when we heard the story of a parishioner who lost a child only to be told by another parishioner that God needed another angel in the heavenly choir. ***This*** kind of meaning-making can feel like an escape or, worse, like making someone who is already suffering pay for another person’s desire for meaning, order, and stability.” (*ibid*.)

Speaking about our Gospel story, Dr. Lose notes that “Peter… has taken this momentous encounter with God’s prophets and fitted it into a pre-existing narrative and religious framework that helps him make sense of this otherwise inexplicable and somewhat terrifying event.

“Yet by doing so he comes perilously close to **missing** an encounter with God. For just after he stops speaking -- almost interrupting him, in fact -- a voice from heaven both announces and commands, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!’ Peter wants to fit what is happening into a plan. God invites him instead to experience the wonder and mystery of Jesus.

“I wonder how often we do the same,” David Lose continues. “We desperately want an encounter with God – some sense that we are not alone, that there is something *More* than what we can see and touch – and yet in those very moments that God draws near we find ourselves afraid, unsure, and feeling suddenly very out of control, and so we try to domesticate our experience of the Holy by fitting it into a plan.

“Why? I suspect that as much as we **want** an encounter with God, we simultaneously *fear* the presence of God *because we fear being changed*, being transformed [which is what happens when we lay ourselves open to God]. What we have, who we are, may not be everything we want, but at least we know it, are used to it, have built a relatively orderly life around it. And so when God comes – perhaps not in a transfiguration as dramatic as Mark describes but in the ordinary hopes, encounters, and tragedies of our everyday life – when God comes and unsettles the orderly lives we’ve constructed, we try to put those disruptive experiences back into line by cramming them into [a framework,] a plan.

“But maybe, just maybe, there **is** no plan,” Dr. Lose suggests. “Maybe there’s only love.” (*ibid*.)

Fr. John Shea says that **interpreting** events and happenings in life amounts to a human *compulsion*. He writes: “The fact is we cannot leave anything alone. Everything we encounter is quickly and compulsively **interpreted**… When our experiences do not easily yield meaning, we will ‘wring’ it out of them or ‘bestow’ it on them. What will **not** be tolerated are ***un***appropriated happenings.” (*Stories of God*, Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1978, pp. 25-26) There will be no un-interpreted mysteries. We cannot simply sit back and “behold”, or “listen”, as the voice from heaven commands. We must **interpret**, ***com***prehend, and ***app***rehend every experience – even experiences of great Mystery.

And so today, in all denominations using the Common Lectionary, preachers like me are standing before congregations like you trying to **interpret** this epiphany, theophany, Mystery which we call the Transfiguration; to put it into a framework we are familiar and comfortable with, that we can understand. To domesticate it, if you will; get control of it. You would think that we would at *least* pick up the hint from the Gospel text where Mark says that Jesus’ clothing “became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them.” Mark is saying, in effect, “There aren’t words to describe how Jesus appeared. It is so far beyond what we could ever explain or imagine or comprehend. It is Wonder and Mystery.”

Can we not simply **behold** the Mystery of God and **listen** to the message it is speaking to us before we start putting our own interpretations and imposing our own meanings on the Mystery?

And so I have had to revisit that question, “What is the function of a Christian minister?” For while I think there can still be some value in *interpreting* life’s vicissitudes in order to put them in a meaningful framework, I now believe there is a even greater function to which I am called. As David Lose puts it, the function “isn’t to fit our experience – let alone everyone else’s – into some kind of ‘divine plan,’ but rather to create space for people to experience the wonder and mystery of God” and to stand “together in the mystery of God and God’s love… [C]hurch should not be the place we look for order and stability but rather the place we meet up to share our stories of wonder and worry and hope and disappointment and stand with each other as the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus draws near once again to unsettle our plans and meet us in the mystery of God’s love.” (David Lose, *ibid*.)

AMEN