

Tuesday, August 18, 2020

Someone is missing

- Pastor Hank French

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 (Mark 9:2-4).

I think most Christians would recognize today's devotional text as the Transfiguration. Jesus takes his three closest disciples up a high mountain, and some very strange things happened. First, Jesus was transfigured, that is to say, his appearance changed, his divinity became visible to his followers, symbolized by the "dazzling" whiteness of his clothes. Mark's purpose in telling this story is to assure those reading the story 40 or more years after Jesus was crucified that Jesus truly was the Messiah, the one sent by God to fulfill God's purposes.

But that was not Mark's only purpose in telling the story. He not only wanted to assure folks that Jesus was the Messiah, he wanted to tell them what kind of a Messiah he was. And that's why two men suddenly appeared on the mountain in front of the disciples—Moses and Elijah. And Jesus had a conversation with them.

Moses and Elijah were two towering figures in Hebrew history. A third towering figure in Hebrew history was King David. He did not make it to the mountain, and that's Mark's way of telling those who read or hear his gospel what kind of a Messiah Jesus was.

The Hebrew people had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah to come. There were two traditions in Hebrew religion about what kind of a man the Messiah would be. One of those traditions came from the stories about King David, perhaps the greatest warrior king in Israel's history. The other tradition came from the stories about Moses, perhaps the greatest prophet in Israel's history. Kings are warriors and rely on the coercive power of the sword. Prophets are not warriors; they rely on the persuasive power of God's word, the word of Justice and love.

Most Jews were hoping for a Messiah from the house of David, a warrior king who would use the power of the sword to defeat Israel's enemies (the Romans in Jesus' time) and restore Israel's national sovereignty. Other Jews harked back to the book of Deuteronomy where God is reported as telling Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command."

The fact that David is missing on the mountaintop is Mark's way of telling folks that the true Messiah was not meant to be a warrior king; he was meant to be a man who proclaimed God's desire for justice and love.

At the end of his story, Mark reports that the disciples heard a voice saying: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Given that he wrote 40 years after Jesus died, it is clear that the voice in the story is speaking to us, telling us to "Listen to him!" Listen and follow his way of love and justice. That is what our world needs desperately.

Prayer: Holy one, give us ears to listen with and the will to live what we hear. Amen.