

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Do you have stories from your own life-experience which you like to tell? Are you a good storyteller? When you tell them, do you go on too long, or do you keep people's interest by giving interesting, pertinent details? Are you careful not to stop too often and philosophize? Do you avoid going down side streets and distracting rabbit-holes? When people listen to your stories, are they able to imagine the scenes you describe? Are they able to construct a picture in their minds, one of their own imagination? And then, are they compelled to stay with you while you're telling about the incident, as you move rapidly from one image to the next? Do you use 'cliff-hangers' every once in a while to make people hold their breath and wait anxiously for the next episode of your story? Do you think it's better to hear your story told than to read it from some manuscript?

Many think that the author of the Gospel of Mark created his reflections about Jesus' life and times so that it could be told aloud, and that the written manuscript would mostly be used to help the gospel storytellers to memorize all the fact and details. And good gospel storytellers would be ones who were able to hold the interest of their audiences by sticking to the important points, using cliff-hangers, moving the story right along, and not playing around with sidebars or tangents or adding extra, unhelpful material. Mark's whole gospel could be shared verbally in less than an hour, while walking together to the next town, or sitting around the campfire. And yet, it had dramatic episodes and compelling images, and yes, even cliff-hangers to keep the conversation interesting. Even the ending of Mark's story is an abrupt cliff-hanger, when the women fearfully flee from the empty tomb. And the purpose, of course, of all this strategic story-telling was to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark says so in the opening sentence.

We will be hearing much from Mark's Gospel during this year, and today we have heard his rendition of the story known as The Transfiguration. This famous episode from the life and ministry of Jesus is always used on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, for it ties together all our experience of the unveiling of just who Jesus is, why we call him the Son of God. In this episode, he is an equal to the great prophets; he is bathed in brilliant, holy, revealing light; we even hear the voice of God proclaiming the truth of his identity. But there is much more to the story. There are many compelling moving parts, many which might tempt your average storyteller to wander from the experience into unnecessary sidebars, distracting from the power of the image being created in the minds and imaginations of the audience. Mark doesn't bother with why Moses and Elijah are there, he doesn't explain why Peter might have thought it would be a good idea to build booths for them; he doesn't spend a lot of time explaining the symbolism of dazzling white clothes or why God's voice seem to come from a cloud. The image is enough; the experience is the episode; the mystery is the story.

And it is an emotional story, a dramatic mystery. The disciples Peter, James, and John, may have just thought they were going for a walk with Jesus, happy and proud that he chose them in particular to keep him company. But then all unexpected heck breaks loose and they are terrified. [Sidebar: typically when a Bible character is scared, there is someone there to say "be not afraid!" Not in this case...apparently terror is meant to be an unavoidable part of the transfiguration experience. Just saying....] Mark wants us to share in their emotional reactions, to ride the rollercoaster along with them. Suddenly they are baffled as they look around and find that they are standing there alone on the mountain with Jesus, as if nothing had happened. We are meant to share in their confusion and

puzzlement, as Mark weaves this perplexing story. So then, as they are coming down from the mountain, Jesus orders them not to tell anyone about this event until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead! Wait, what? Who said anything about anyone rising from the dead?! What a cliff-hanger that is!

A good storyteller like Mark wants the audience to experience the moment with the characters, to live with the questions they have and the emotions they are feeling. In this case, we are meant to live the sensations of the disciples, awed by what they were seeing and hearing. What in heaven's name is going on? They might ask. And there are no specific answers. Was that God's voice we heard? And what did it say, again? And how did God say it? Did God say "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to what he commands you!" Or did God say "Aw...this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him! Isn't he wonderful?!" Was all this meant to be a warning, or a celebration? Was it meant to be an apocalyptic prophesy, or a joyful epiphany? Was it meant to be enigmatic, or reassuring? The disciples are to live with these questions, and the storyteller wants us to do the same, I think. That is the power of the season of Epiphany, and the manner in which we move our hearts into the season of Lent. And the cliffhanger which keeps us on board from this seasonal episode to the next is the secrecy Jesus demands as we come down from the mountaintop of Epiphany. If we have really heard the story, then we have really experienced the anxiety of not knowing what will come next. If the Transfiguration episode has led us to believe that Jesus is to be taken seriously, then what he alludes to, the death of that which has become familiar, will be something with which to be reckoned someday soon.

When the event with Moses and Elijah is over, and the three disciples are walking back down the mountain, Jesus curiously orders them not to tell anyone about what they had seen. We have heard, too, that Jesus has ordered the demons whom he has exorcised to be silent and tell no one who he is. This theme is a recurring one in the Gospel of Mark, and is referred to by scholars as the 'Markan Secret.' It is curious enough, that over the generations, it has been the source of much study and controversy. Was Jesus concerned that people might follow him because of some celebrity attraction rather than true faith? Was he worried that the Herodians might find him such a threat that he might be arrested and killed like John the Baptist before his ministry could get off-the-ground? It may be that Jesus wanted to be known directly, not by some story people were telling *about* him. Did he want each person, each of us, to experience him in our own way, in our own time? That is, to experience his love, his grace, his authority, his hope, and his dreams personally. Is that why Mark provides us with the narrative, but with no explanatory sidebars? Are we to have our own epiphanies when we first meet Jesus ourselves? Will we be taught the meaning of the story when we first try to teach it? Will the mysteries make more sense when we ourselves are the storytellers?

Unlike Peter, James, and John that day, most of us have heard other storytellers tell these tales before, and we know the rest of the story. Or do we, really? Mark's gospel leaves the whole story open-ended and unresolved, at the empty tomb. It's like one of those films where you can choose your own ending, creating a personalized narrative. The Gospel story is not meant to be a closed book, is it? When we experience these stories, aren't we challenged to write and tell our own sequels, our own personalized episodes, carrying the theme and mysteries of the story forward in time and place? Those sequels haven't yet been written. We don't yet know what lines to learn by heart. We don't know just what characters we will be called upon to play or how we will act them out. We don't yet know what relationships we will need to represent. We don't yet know what costumes we will wear or how to style our hair. It is yet a mystery, an anxious yet compelling mystery. There are secrets and uncertainty as we make our way back down the mountain. Well, here's hoping that authentic and significant Lenten experiences will help us figure that out together. Amen