

***“Up and down the Mountain”***

***Mark 9:2-8***

***Sermon***

***11/18/2018***

Peter had a propensity for putting his foot in his mouth. If he thought it, he said it. If he felt it, he acted on it. Anyone who spent time with him knew exactly how he felt and thought at any given moment. Perhaps he had what we now call an impulse control issue. With him as a friend one never wondered what he was thinking. Jesus must have seen beyond Peter's impetuous outbursts. After all Mark tells us it was Jesus who told Peter: ***You are the rock and on this rock I will build my church.*** It was Peter who became a major leader in the early church. It was Peter, alone among the disciples, that first proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. But let's get back to seeing Peter who at times had his foot in his mouth. Remember it was Peter who, almost immediately after calling Jesus the Messiah, had the nerve to challenge Jesus about the meaning of Messiahship. Mark says that when Jesus ***began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*** Jesus wasted no time in responding: ***Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.***

Never mind the details of this exchange, one thing is sure, Peter just did not know when to keep quiet. It was he who boasted that he would never deny Jesus and it was he who did just that, if you remember the accounts of Jesus's arrest and trial. ***I never even knew him.*** Quite the statement. I relate to Peter in his struggles with foot in the mouth disease. I know how easy it is to speak my mind, only to live and regret having done so. More than once, I have scolded myself for not keeping my mouth shut before thinking about the implications of my words. The suspicion is I am not alone in this. Peter speaks to me. For despite all his impulsiveness and human frailty God used him as a leader in the Church. He reminds me how many unlikely characters, including myself, God uses.

These thoughts this morning help me remember that there is no one that is incapable of loving God through loving God's people and therefore no one who is not called to help bring about, in Jesus's words: ***the kingdom that is at hand.*** They also help me remember and understand the event Mark describes. He tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain where they had a strange, mystical, experience. Which is to say they knew that somehow everything had changed and were not sure what to do next.

***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 and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.***

I do not understand this story, nor do many biblical scholars. But I do know that Mark is telling us that Jesus (so recently identified as the Messiah) is part of the long Jewish tradition. He presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's dream, the fulfillment of the Law (represented by Moses) and the fulfillment of the prophecy (represented by Elijah). Even so, it is a difficult story to tell in our day, with our more objective approach to understanding the world around us. It flies in the face of that understanding. And so we ask, how could these things really happen? Are they factually what happened? I have trouble hearing this story as history. Yet I resonate with Peter's response. I always want the high moments of my life to last, the times of clarity and certainty to stay with me. I want to protect them so they will never be forgotten. I want, if you will, to build places that will keep them eternally. I want the times when God is a certainty to last forever. So I understand Peter's response.

***Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.***

Whatever the experience, Peter had it. He knew what he experienced. He wanted to do something that would allow that new reality to always be available. He wanted to do it immediately. His impulse was to build a shrine. He wanted to declare the mountain as a place from which he can come and go at will, a place to experience a high moment. But Jesus had another idea. No shrines need to be built, he tells Peter. Your impulsiveness is leading you to the wrong path. The moment does not call for a shrine. Building one would negate the experience and tie it down, rather than open people to the spirit, to an encounter with eternity, with God. Jesus again feels compelled to rebuke Peter for opening his mouth too soon. Not quite as strongly as other times, but even so he directs Peter to: ***Tell no one until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead.*** It is a reminder that Jesus, the one Peter loved so much, would have to die before the ground on which they were standing, would be made holy. The transfiguration of the world and its people would take place not in a shrine, but rather within the everyday lives of those who waited and listened and accepted the reality of Jesus, his life, his death, and resurrection. Jesus, the culmination of Israel's hope, would be found as people obeyed the Law and the prophet. Jesus had earlier answered any questions about the meaning of this experience when he said, in response to an earlier question: ***What must I do to***