

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Mark 9.1-8

February 11, 2018, Transfiguration Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Lesson: Mark 9.1-8

Linda Zaugg

⁹And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’

² 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, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one* on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then 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.’ ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

Anthem “And the Glory of the Lord," *Messiah* The Sanctuary Choir
"And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Isaiah 40:5

Sermon

Seeing and Being Seen

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I love this music and this promise from Isaiah that the glory of God will be revealed and everyone will see it *together*.

This isn't the enlightenment of a few at the expense of others or a private glimpse into the wonder of the universe. It's a promise that all of us – together – can have this vision of the glory that surrounds us and infuses our lives with the kind of light that breaks through our inability to see.

Before I go too far this morning, I would like to invite you to pray with me a prayer by the great Howard Thurman - a teacher, a preacher, and a mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It's his reflection on that old hymn "Be Thou My Vision" and since the promise for today is that we will see this glory together, I invite you to read this prayer with me. It's printed in your bulletin.

I seek Thy vision not for tomorrow, not for some future day when I am more worthy and more prepared to know and understand. I seek Thy vision this day. Grant to me the flooding of my whole self with the light of Thy countenance that I may know directly when I have missed the way – when I have drifted out of the channel of Thy Purpose.

Flood my whole self with the light of your presence so that I will know immediately when I have missed the point and drifted away from my divine purpose.

That's my prayer today on this Transfiguration Sunday.

You have probably already noticed that there is a thread running through the texts for today.

The choir sang: "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall *see* it together."

The story from Mark this morning begins with the promise to the disciples that "some of them standing there would not taste death until they *see* that the reign of God has come with power." Then Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain and they *see* this vision of Jesus and Elijah and Moses in glory. And Peter misses the point and the vision was gone.

As I have been thinking about this story I can't help but think about the last sermon Dr. King ever preached. It was April 3, 1968. Things were rough in the movement. There was division and frustration and exhaustion and not a lot of evidence that they were getting anywhere.

And so people gathered together in that church in Memphis. And Dr. King reminded them of their purpose and their place in history. And he ended his sermon with echoes of this story in Mark:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

And then he was gone.

And the question was – and still is – did we miss the point?

What made Dr. King so powerful wasn't just that he had been to the mountaintop and could see this vision – this dream – of the promised land. He was willing to *be seen* – even if that cost him his life.

The civil rights movement was about seeing; seeing racial injustice and inequality and white supremacy. But it wasn't only about seeing. It was also about *being seen*. It was about not being invisible anymore. It was about standing up. It was about putting your life on the line.

I think that's the point of the protest swirling around the national anthem and Colin Kaepernick. We want to see Colin Kaepernick play football. But we do not want him to *be seen* protesting the way our world is – the way our nation can tolerate and justify and litigate the killing of black sisters and brothers on our streets. We may see him. But we don't want to listen to him. And it looks like *being seen* may have cost him his career.

What's that old line about children? They should be "seen and not heard."

According to Mary Ann Tolbert, that's the disciples' problem. It is the irony of Mark and of this story. This Child of God – this beloved one – is seen and not heard. The disciples get to see all this glory – the glory of the healings and the feeding of thousands and now this vision of Jesus with Elijah and Moses – and they miss the point. So the vision fades and a voice from heaven says: "This is my beloved one, *listen* to him."

The disciples see all this glory but they don't want to hear about being on this journey of resistance together – a journey that might cost them their lives. Seeing is fine. But *being seen*, well, but nobody wants to hear about that.

Tolbert reminds us that this reluctance to be seen shouldn't be surprising to any of us. Or unfamiliar for that matter. When these disciples see their lives in the light of this glory, they are terrified. And there is nothing like fear to make us want to hide.

I know about that fear. And I know something about the cost of being seen. Some of you know that fear too. And that cost. But I also realize that if I want things to change, I have to be willing to be seen.

I wonder if there has ever been any social change that has happened without someone being willing to be seen.

Some of you may be thinking right now about that line in the Sermon on the Mount about not doing your good works to "be seen" by others. And there is a difference between showing off and showing up. There is a difference between making a spectacle of yourself and putting yourself out there to stand for something. There is a difference between pretense and a passion for something that won't let you hide even if you wanted to.

Perhaps the greatest fear we have about being seen is that we aren't ready. We don't know enough. If we put ourselves out there we won't know what to do or how to be.

That's why our prayer with Howard Thurman this morning begins: "I seek Thy vision not for tomorrow, not for some future day when I am *more worthy* and *more prepared* to understand. I seek Thy vision *this* day."

We are as ready today as we will ever be to be seen.

There is that old Marianne Williamson quote that was once wrongly attributed to Nelson Mandela. In her reflection on *The Course in Miracles* she says:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

You are as ready as you will ever be to be seen. And the social change you want may depend on it.

You know the power of being seen because, I suspect, there has been some point in your life when your life was changed by being seen.

I was reading a story by Omid Safi that was part of the "On Being" series. Omid was a Muslim student at a university and during the fasting month of Ramadan, the university had made no accommodation for

Muslim students. So Omid would get up at 4 in the morning to eat cereal alone in his room as he prepared for the sunrise to sunset day of fasting. Omid says: “I felt alone, cut off, isolated ... Can you be a person of faith without people who see you for who you are, what you are, and what you aspire to become?”

And then a professor showed up. After class one day, he asked Omid what he was doing for Ramadan breakfast. “I answered truthfully,” Omid said, “and the professor looked me and said: ‘Well, that is just unacceptable.’” The professor said he would pick him the next morning at 4 a.m. for breakfast.

Like the polite Persian boy that my momma had raised me to be, not wanting to inconvenience anyone, I refused the very thing that I very much desired. He saw me, saw through me: “Nonsense [he said]. I’ll see you in the morning.”

In the morning he came with a few other brown kids crammed into a small car. I got in. We drove to the local Waffle House. When we walked in, much to my surprise, the place was packed. Muslims. And truckers. It was fairly easy to tell the Muslims apart from the truckers. (Years later I hoped there would be some Muslim truckers.) We sat there having waffles, eggs, coffee ... It wasn’t about the food. And it wasn’t about the car ride. It was that [the professor] saw me. He saw me and let me remember that I was somebody. I remember nothing else from that year of school, nothing else that I learned, but I remembered that a teacher made me feel like I was somebody, that I mattered, that I was important, that I was human. I wish I could tell you that I have always had a clear sense of my own self-worth, my inherent dignity as a human being. The truth of the matter is that I needed someone to let me know that I was seen to feel like a human being.

May we live like this.

May we see each other for who we are, for what we are.

May we face each other,

Seeing and being seen.

Loving and being loved.

May we see all of us.
May we be seen.

It seems to me, beloved ones, that the purpose of our lives is not simply to see those glimpses of glory that are all around us but to *be seen*; to not be invisible and to let others know that they are being seen too.

It's not just a vision for a mountain top. It's right here. It's today. And you are as prepared as you need to be.

So today, if you hear that voice – that voice calling you to be seen – do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), p.191. Martin Luther King, Jr. ed. James M. Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), p.203. Mary Anne Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989/1996), pp.204-207. Marianne Williamson, *Return to Love* (Harper Collins, 1992). Omid Safi, "The Power of Being Seen for Who We Are," <https://onbeing.org/author/omid-safi>.