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Transfiguration of the Lord
Year B
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RUSHMORE

MARK 9:2-9

Mt. Rushmore is getting a facelift. The US Department of the Interior's National Park Service has announced that "Mt. Rushmore is beginning the process to create a new General Management Plan to guide the future plans for the memorial," and the public is invited to participate. You and I are invited to participate (and you thought the congregational hymn survey was ambitious...).

The memorial is not in grave danger. The estimated erosion rate is one inch every 10,000 years. Still, the faces carved there are beginning to show their age. The project began October 4, 1927, and was completed on October 31 (All Hallows Eve), 1941. That's fourteen years (and I thought that I push deadlines).

If the public is involved in the management of the memorial, who knows what it will look like fourteen years from now? With four presidents looking back at us when we behold the mountain in all of its glory, it already appears to be the work of a committee. Take into consideration the opinions of three hundred million plus Americans, and there may not be enough space among the Black Hills of South Dakota for all of the faces that we as a nation would have chiseled in stone.

Whose face would you recommend? It would not necessarily have to be a president. It just so happens that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln were called to serve this nation's highest office. Maybe you would take one or more of their faces down and replace them with non-presidential others?

Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor from St. Charles, Idaho, who fashioned the memorial, is quoted on nps.gov as saying, "A monument's dimensions should be determined by the importance to civilization of the events commemorated. We are not here trying to carve an epic, portray a moonlight scene, or write a sonnet; neither are we dealing with mystery or tragedy, but rather the constructive and dramatic moments or crises in our amazing history."

I confess to being mildly disappointed with this statement. You know me well enough to know that epics enthrall me (as of yesterday, I have been here one year). You know that I am comfortable with moonlight (and *Moonlight and Magnolias* at Shelton State University) and celebrate mystery, especially when tragedy comes, and come it does, sometimes as one of those dramatic crises about which Borglum speaks.

It seems to me that the dramatic crises are weathered more ably when the constructive moments are remembered vividly, and history, is, in fact, beheld as amazing.

Mark assumes this in providing this account of the Transfiguration of the Lord. The story begins with Jesus leading Peter, James and John to a high mountain (not Rushmore, possibly Hermon). Then, Mark transitions abruptly to Jesus being "transfigured." I remember being intimidated by this term as a boy. I was not sure what it meant to be transfigured, and given the tone with which the adults spoke about transfiguration, I doubted that I would volunteer. Transfiguration seemed dangerous.

And, of course, it is. In transfiguration, change meets exaltation. This change involves sacrifice. For Jesus Christ, this sacrifice is life itself. As we pray in one of the church's Memorial Acclamations, "Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord, Jesus come in glory." Jesus cannot come in glory until he passes through life and death to resurrection. One major change begets another and then another, and through this series of events, Jesus is exalted as the Christ, as the one who was and is and is to come.

Mark provides us with a glimpse of God's glory early in the narrative. Mark states bluntly: Jesus is transfigured. How do we know this? The Messiah is robed in white, and this is not Mt. Rushmore white; this is dazzling white. This white is angelic. It signifies epiphany or enlightenment. It proclaims that the Lord has spoken. In the Greek canon, it foreshadows judgment, not judgment as given by a judge or executioner, but judgment born of grace and mercy that exudes love and light, wisdom and peace.

In Scripture's final revelation, the Revelation according to John (singular), the angel to the church in Sardis proclaims, "If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes (plural), and I will blot your name before the Lord and angels." This is followed by a Prayer for Illumination: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (another plural)."

The conquest language is disturbing, and yet this is God gathering the church unto God's self. Yes, there is one Lord, one God and one baptism for the remission of sins, but the church is as multifarious as the heavenly choir. Later in Revelation, John declares, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

Here we are, members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) worshiping a God who is ecumenical and international. Thanks be to God that the church is beginning to understand. By now, you have probably opened the e-mail in which it was announced that the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley approved amendment 08-B, which asks the church to step away from the bedroom. However, what you may not know is that we voted in favor of another amendment, one that reaffirms the existence of non-geographic presbyteries, presbyteries that take into consideration the denomination's ethnic diversity and the differences in language suggested by that diversity. Suddenly, the church is noticing that "great

multitude...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white.”

Now the question of whose face belongs on Mt. Rushmore seems more urgent, because every face represented on the side of that mountain is white (and not dazzling white, just plain, dull and somewhat dingy white), and the predominant language spoken by these historically significant figures is English.

Of course, Borglum does not profess to be doing theology or being the church, but Mark does. The faces that appear on this mountainside in Mark’s Gospel speak Hebrew and Greek. They are Jewish and post-Jewish, even Christian in retrospect.

In this transfiguration story, Mark chisels the face of Jesus alongside those of Moses and Elijah. Moses, the patron saint of stutterers, led a covenant people out of Egypt, and God gives this covenant people the Law through Moses. In Jesus Christ, there is a new law, a law of love that is as edgy and prophetic as anything that Elijah ever preached.

Moses and Elijah chat with Jesus until Peter interrupts saying, “Rabbi (Jesus), it is good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Jewish tradition suggests that they do so, because they have clearly had an epiphany.

But just in case there was any question, a cloud overshadows them, and a voice from the cloud proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Remember *his* baptism. What follows is Oscar-worthy cinematography. Moses and Elijah fade into the background, and Jesus is exalted as the Christ. The Spirit confirms that this the one who will be crucified on Good Friday and raised on Easter, but please, please, do not say anything to anyone until then.

The faces on the mountain are crumbling, all except Jesus Christ’s. The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. Weeping lasts for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

A spiritual practice that I commend to you is remembering your history and recognizing who God has used to help you grow in faith and life. If that person is still alive, I challenge you to say, "Thank you" every time that opportunity presents itself. Thank you---not for what this person has done---but for what God has and is and will do through this person.

There is a difference between gratitude and idolatry. As the church of Jesus Christ, let us give thanks for Elijah's clarity of vision and Moses' strength of purpose. Let us give thanks for leaders past and present, for the saints who gather with us every time that the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated, and at the end of the day, let us remember that the grass withers, the flower fades, and in so doing, let us bask in the glory of Christ our Savior. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen.