

He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration), Year B
1 Kings 19:9-18; 2 Peter 1:16-19(20-21); Mark 9:2-10; Psalm 27 or 27:5-11
St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana
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Mark 9:2-10

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. Then 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." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

When Coral called me Tuesday night to tell me that Jonathan's mother had died, my first thought was for the Hutchisons in their grief: a quick prayer for safe travel, and for God's healing touch for Duy and Jonathan and Deborah and Patrick and Daniel in their pain.

When Coral went on to ask me if I could preach and lead Morning Prayer this morning if she were unable to find a supply priest, my thought was, "of course, that is the least I can do." It felt like a way to help, to take some small burden of worry off my friends' shoulders. And, to be completely honest, I was pretty sure she'd be able to find a priest.

When she called back Wednesday afternoon to tell me she'd been through the supply list and hadn't found a priest for this Sunday, I was a little nervous, but I gladly changed my plans for today and started making plans to lead the service.

Then I started thinking. That was my big mistake.

We don't usually do Morning Prayer here at St. David's, and I had never led this service, so I pulled out the Prayer Book and started thinking about what needed to be done. Now, for a simple service, meant to be celebrated daily, the text of Morning Prayer can be really complicated: lots of options, lots of choices. I started to worry.

I started to think about how simple and familiar our Sunday Eucharists usually are here, and how easy Jonathan makes it look. I started to worry that I wouldn't be able to pull it together, that I would somehow offend people, and I knew that if I forgot something, I wouldn't have the option of just pulling out my guitar and singing.

Then it got even weirder. I thought back to my field education at All Saints, Indianapolis, and I remembered Father Steven lecturing the sacristans on the symbolic importance of the correct vestments. Checking my notes, I saw that the "correct" vesture for a lay leader at Morning Prayer is a black cassock and white surplice – Now there is a combination that I doubt has ever been seen within the boundaries of Brown County. Of all things to be worrying about, I began to obsess over what I should wear.

Thankfully, at this point I got an e-mail from Pamela Smith, letting me know what hymns had been selected for this Sunday, and asking if there was anything she could do to help. I'm sure she had no idea what she was walking into.

I responded with a frantic, babbling message about service bulletins and preaching and hymns and anthems and cassocks and surplices and aaaah! What are we going to do?

True to form, Pamela yanked me back in off the ledge. She wrote, "Jesus keeps saying, 'Pay attention to reality!' So pay attention to reality, ok? It's still Sunday morning in Beanblossom."

And indeed, it is still Sunday morning in Beanblossom. Reality is right here, no matter how much we may get sidetracked on the details. No matter how much we may try to turn the focus on ourselves, Jesus keeps telling us, "look at the reality right before your eyes!"

I wish I could say this little breakdown was a one-time event, but it seems to be part of who I am. I remember that when my grandmother died, and friends and family began to gather at her house, I became obsessed with keeping the house tidy, to the point that I was grabbing empty coffee cups almost before they touched the table, and would have them washed and back in the cupboard before the coffee-drinker even had a chance to decide that she was finished.

I know that it's a control issue. And I know that control issues are fear issues. Coffee cups and countertops were something I could control, something I could be sure of, in a situation where the loss of someone I loved very much was forcing me to acknowledge how much of reality is beyond our feeble illusions of being in charge. Cassocks and bulletins were something I knew how to deal with, when the reality of my friends' pain and grief was too difficult, too frightening.

This is one of the reasons I really like Peter and the apostles in Mark's Gospel. Peter, who loves Jesus so deeply, and who so desperately wants to do what is right, but who, time and again, manages to speak when he should be listening and act when he should be holding his horses. And the apostles who manage "not to get it" so spectacularly throughout the whole gospel, focusing on themselves and on side issues and ignoring the reality of Jesus the Christ right in front of them.

A few verses before today's reading, Peter has gotten it right, for once. When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter blurts, "You are the Messiah." But then, immediately, when Jesus begins to speak plainly of his own death and resurrection, Peter tries to correct him, tries to shut him up – the plain talk about the reality of the suffering to come frightens him, and he doesn't want to hear it.

And now, in today's gospel, Jesus takes Peter and John and James, his closest disciples, and shows them something remarkable: Jesus transfigured into a form that allows them to see him as he truly is in his cosmic reality, as the

continuation and fulfillment of Israel's tradition of the Law and the Prophets, as Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus shows his friends a beautiful but difficult piece of reality: that the Galilean peasant rabbi they know is truly the son of God.

And what is the disciples' response? They are terrified. What they have seen is too difficult for them to deal with, too much to take in. And so good old Peter starts babbling about something that he can handle: redecorating. Building a monument. Something simple that he knows how to do. Like washing coffee cups.

The author of the gospel acknowledges that this is a fairly silly thing to say: "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified." Jesus and his father God don't even bother to respond to Peter's goofy suggestion. Instead, God, in the voice from the cloud, says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to him!" Listen to the reality that is right in front of you! This is important! Listen! And as they are going down the mountain, Jesus tells them to tell no one, to say nothing. Don't talk! Be silent! Stop babbling!

In the face of difficult reality, of a reality too big for us to handle, it is worth remembering to be quiet and listen. At the points when we are terrified or when we are awed or when we don't know what to say, often it is best to say nothing. When we are frightened, God is talking – hush!

We don't need to build a memorial. We don't need to convene a task force to study the reality and issue a report. We don't need to go on CNN or Fox News and blah blah blah about all the ramifications and implications. We need to look and listen to the reality that God has put before our faces.

As a people, we seem to be deathly afraid of silence, but listening in silence may be just what we need to start to pay attention to reality.

In our first reading, God comes to Elijah the prophet at a low point of his career: he is in hiding, chased by the armies of the pagan Queen Jezebel. His reality is so difficult that, just before these verses, he has begged God to let him die. God comes to Elijah; God speaks to Elijah, but not in the roaring wind. God speaks to Elijah, but not in the rumbling earthquake. God speaks to Elijah, but not in the crackling fire. We must remember that Elijah finally hears the voice of God in the sound of sheer silence.