

GOD'S PARADOXICAL LIGHT

Mark 9:2-8

Intro

When I started to look at the passages for today, the first thing that stood out was right at the beginning of the lectionary passage from Mark where it states, 'six days later'. I heard that and the first thing that I thought was, 'ok, so what we are about to hear is somehow connected to what was just said.' And this time, I was actually right!

In the closing verses of chapter 8, and then the opening verse of chapter 9, we hear how Jesus is telling the disciples quite openly how the end of his earthly ministry will take place: that the religious leadership will reject him, will force him to undergo great suffering, that he will be killed and after three days be raised again. Peter eventually balks at this ... to which Jesus responds, 'get behind me Satan'. Jesus then continues with how his followers need to take up their crosses and follow him and not to be ashamed of the message of life that he proclaims. He concludes by saying, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God has come with power.' Six days later a glimpse of 'the Kingdom of God coming with power' manifests itself. As you hear this description, I invite you to ponder, are there ways that the Kingdom of God is able to manifest itself in the world today? The scripture reads this way.

Mark 9:2-8

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.

II Corinthians 4:1-12

Intro

Paul is not afraid of a paradox. In fact, there are quite a few places where through his writing we hear him embracing these paradoxes and in doing so, ultimately handing them to believers to become mantras that point to the Kingdom of God coming with power through their actions, through their lives. Yup, you heard that right: the Kingdom of God coming with power...through those who believe in Jesus.

So, now I'll turn up the volume on the question that was asked earlier: how does the Kingdom of God manifest itself through your life? Today? The scripture reads this way.

II Corinthians 4:1-12

⁴Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of

everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

'God's Paradoxical Light'

I was bringing Austin out of his physical therapist appointment over in Flemington the other day when his gaze fell upon a young lady a few years younger than he is. Immediately, he fires his hand out and says in his most pleasant of voices, 'Hi! My name is Austin! What's your name?'

The first thought that ran through my head was, 'dude, you have no fear!', for when it comes to chatting with anyone (let alone the ladies), Austin is very much his mother's son, because he is able to strike up a conversation with almost anyone and everyone...like his mother! His father? Yeah, his father is standing just off to the side, shaking his head marveling at how his youngest son is able to stand so proudly even though he isn't able to stand of his own accord anymore.

Now mind you, this is something that most of you know from personal experience: Austin's meet and greet prowess is not an anomaly. We all know he is a kid who will introduce himself and talk to just about everyone (and especially if you happen to be a girl!).

The reason that this very simple example which happens pretty much every time Austin heads out is because of the last line of scripture that we heard from Mark: 'death is at work in us, but life in you.' I'm bringing Austin out of a PT appointment that is used to help maintain what little mobility he still has in his body (and that's only been getting worse as his years have gone along), and the life that is in him still comes shining out in ways that are incredibly bright. It's paradoxical: a child who is limited in so many ways who is able to reach out and affect so many people in a myriad of ways.

Here's the thing: that sort of paradoxical reality is something that all those who are led to proclaim their faith in Jesus are able to exhibit.

Those without words are able to articulate truth in incredible articulate ways.

Those who live in fear who are able to exhibit what true courage looks like and feels like.

Those who are poor, showing how rich they know themselves to be.

Those who appear to be weak displaying levels of strength that cause those whom the world looks at as strong to shake their heads knowing that they would struggle with the burden that is being carried by the one who is viewed as weak.

The passage that we hear in Mark describing the transfiguration describes a physical paradox (on a couple of different levels).

First you have Jesus standing and talking with two leaders of the faith who have been dead for thousands of years.

Yeah, that's not 'normal'. Even in the context of the Bible which has miraculous events all over the place, what is described...doesn't make sense to the way that we view the world. It's paradoxical.

Then you have the transformation that has Jesus going from someone who is very human to someone who is shining forth in ways that have us imagining that he (with Moses and Elijah) are shining like the sun.

This is not a spotlight shining on Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

This is Jesus, Moses, and Elijah shining forth. Talk about a lightbulb moment: this description takes that to a whole new level. It's paradoxical.

And yet, there it is, right before us, challenging us to have faith that these descriptions that are provided are not just far-flung stories, but recollections that, while we certainly understand them to be woefully inadequate, do their best to describe the paradoxical reality that happened to show up there in front of them.

But is that where it ends?

Even if all we do is continue to leaf through the pages of scripture, the answer is a quick and definitive, 'no'.

Start with Jesus. How did his life end?

On a cross...where he died.

And yet, we are told and we have faith that this was not the end of the story, that the one who died was raised from the dead and lives forevermore displaying the brilliance that shown forth before the disciples so long ago.

Then there's Peter, the same Peter that we talked about being told by Jesus, 'get behind me Satan'. He becomes one of the foundational building blocks for the early church.

And if you are looking for one more then look no further than the Christian hunter in Saul who went out into his Jewish world to arrest, imprison, and even kill (or at the very least approve of the killing of) Christians. He ends up becoming the mouthpiece through which the church not only began to grow but continues to look to as the theological diving rod to help provide direction for how we are to live in the world, not only when he first authored his letters but certainly through today and into the days that are yet to come.

Yeah, this whole paradoxical existence of God at work in the world and at work in people's lives: it kept going.

It still does.

Listen again to Paul's words: 'But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.'

And as you already know, that isn't just intended for the Corinthians. It is absolutely intended for all those who are led to say, 'I believe...I believe that Jesus died for me...that Jesus is alive for all people'.

This has been a bit of a chaotic week in my household. Jen and the older two kids got home with the rest of the mission trippers from St. Thomas. Jen had an appointment with an orthopedist to look at her broken wrist. Austin had an appointment down in Philly at the Children's Hospital. There was a snow day that turned into a crazy rain day. Jen had her surgery on Thursday. Friday was trying to deal with the pain that was resulting from a poorly placed splint. That and we're still trying to accomplish all the things that need to happen in order to allow our house to run somewhat smoothly. O yeah, and the Eagles won the Super Bowl.

You know what there hasn't been a lot of time for? Being able to sit down and put together a finely crafted sermon that will cause all of those in attendance to ponder God's presence in their lives in a new or fresh way. Nope. Really didn't have time for that.

Which makes the fact that I am up here at all so utterly appropriate for the sort of reality that God is trying to illuminate to us today. Being a follower of God is not about having it all together or knowing all the answers or having all the 'right' things to say. No, it's about having a life that feels like its upside down and still find ways to love God and neighbor, not because you have it all figured out, but because it ends up shining forth no matter what.

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Those who appear to be weak displaying levels of strength that cause those whom the world looks at as strong to shake their heads knowing that they would struggle with the burden that is being carried by the one who is viewed as weak.

God's paradoxical light did not come to an end when Jesus died: it shines forth today and it is able to shine through each and every one of us. Let that light shine no matter how 'wrong' it may feel. The kingdom of God is coming with power...through you!

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious God, there are some days (or did I mean all days?) when it feels like You just don't make sense. Light out of darkness. Life out of death. Truth spoken even through those of us who fail in

so many ways. And yet, it is true. Your light does shine, life does abide, and truth is able to be heard. Help us to not only accept this truth but then be open to how that reality will manifest itself through each of us. We are but jars of clay and yet Your precious truth abides in us. God, thank You for confounding the wise by showing us what wisdom truly is. It is in the name of the one who died and yet we know lives forevermore that we pray. Amen.