

Following in the Light of Christ
Mark 9:2-9 - February 11, 2024
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I sometimes have a hard time when I don't know what's coming next in life. And to be honest, not knowing what's coming next is particularly hard for me when it comes to sporting events. And no, I'm not talking about today's Super Bowl.

I think my difficulty might have started in 1965. I was 10 years old. I'd fallen in love with the Minnesota Twins who made it to the World Series that year. We didn't get the games on TV, but I listened on the radio. I heard of players such as Jim Kaat, Tony Oliva, and Harmon Killebrew. Alas, the Twins lost the Series to the big, bad Los Angeles Dodgers 4 games to 3. Dodger pitcher Sandy Koufax beat us twice in the Series, including game seven. For this young fan, game seven was heartbreaking. Remember the final score? 2-0.

The next time the Twins were in the World Series—1987—I was much more grown-up and emotionally prepared for the outcome—not!!! This time it was the Twins verses the St. Louis Cardinals. Game six rolled around. We were behind 3 games to 2. And in the bottom of the fifth inning, we were behind 5 runs to 2. I couldn't bear to watch it. So, I strapped on my tennis shoes, set the VCR, and went for a very long walk. When I got back, I caught a glimpse of the TV, hoping for some good news. Sure enough, we'd won the game 11-5. I could hardly believe it! There was going to be a game seven! Now I could relax and enjoy the action that I'd missed, including Kent Hrbek's glorious grand slam in the bottom of the 6th inning.

And if you think I was in mess in game 6, you should have seen me in game 7. The score was tied 2-2 going into the sixth inning. The tennis shoes came back on, the VCR was set, and I got lots and lots of vigorous exercise. And again, after returning home, I glanced at the TV hoping to catch a glimpse of how things turned out. Sure enough, the game was over and the Twins had prevailed. I was ecstatic! We were World Champions!

Call me a wimp, I don't care. It's just that sometimes I have a hard time not knowing what's coming next in life – whether it's a sporting event, a lab report from the doctor, or news of who won the election. Anybody else have this problem or is it just me?

For what it's worth, I think Jesus' disciples—as they began heading toward Jerusalem—were also getting anxious about what was coming next. And there was no VCR for them to set. In chapter 8 of Mark, right before today's reading, Jesus and his disciples were on a retreat at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had some questions for his disciples: *Who am I? And where are we going?* Peter declared the unthinkable: “Jesus, you are the Messiah – our long-awaited king.” I have no doubt that Peter's bold words took their breath away.

What came next, however, was not at all what Peter and the others were expecting. In so many words, Jesus confided that he would not be conquering the Romans and restoring the glory of Israel, as so many expected of the Messiah. No, he was going to Jerusalem, and he would experience great suffering at the hands of the elders and scribes, and he would be killed.” That's what Jesus predicted, not once, not twice, but three times over the course of their journey. Jesus added a line at the end, something about being “raised from the dead,” but I have a hunch that they were so much in shock that they missed that entirely.

How devastating for the disciples to hear Jesus talk like that. They'd fallen in love with this rabbi from Galilee. And if you think it was hard for me when the Twins lost the '65 World Series, just imagine losing the rabbi on whom you had staked your whole life. Peter took Jesus aside. He was deeply troubled. He said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Jesus' response to Peter was swift and sharp: “Get behind me, Satan! You're a stumbling block to me. You're not thinking divine things but human things.”

Peter was offended at the thought of the cross being God's will for the one he had called Messiah. And now—as we get closer to today's reading—Jesus deepens the offense by explaining to the disciples that the cross is God's will *for them* too. And what that cross means in the eyes of the world is not even close to what it means in the eyes of God.

I suspect that the command to bear a cross feels like a crisis for Jesus' followers, because it appears to be a path to defeat. It means more than putting up with a few inconveniences along the way. It means following in the footsteps of Jesus, and that involves standing with those who are weak, opening up doors for those deemed unacceptable, working hard to love those who are very hard to love. Know anybody like that? Cross bearers forfeit the game of power before the very first inning. Instead, they “deny themselves” and take up their cross, just like their Lord.

When I was at Bethlehem in the Twin Cities, prior to coming to Good Shepherd, we worked on a new welcome statement. There was a particular line that convicted me every time I heard it. It went: “Jesus set tables for people who never thought they would sit together, and we strive to practice this same generous hospitality for all people, with all of the differences we bring.”

Friends, this sort of welcome is probably needed just as badly at Good Shepherd in Wells as it is in the Twin Cities. It sounds like cross-bearing to me. There’s a lot at stake in welcoming others. Jesus is telling us that, though the cross may look insignificant and foolish to the world, bearing a cross counts in the kingdom of God. It’s a life that is spent soothing the pain of the sick, caring for children in need, hammering nails in houses for those without shelter, sharing bread with the hungry, finding room for those with whom we might disagree. Here’s the truth: denying oneself may seem like a squandered life in a self-centered age, but in the kingdom of God, it is a lavish treasure.

So, all you disciples of Jesus, are you ready for what’s coming next—whether in your own life or your family or here at Good Shepherd? Ever worry about where Jesus might ask you to go? Six days after his compelling words to his disciples, Jesus heads up a mountain with Peter, James, and John. Suddenly they’re joined by Moses and Elijah who represent the Law and the Prophets. Jesus stands in the long line of all that God has promised to Israel, but pay close attention: now in Jesus God is offering them so much more. Suddenly Jesus is shining as bright as the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. The disciples can’t help but wonder: *Who is this man we are following and where is he taking us anyway?*

What happened on that mountaintop is commonly referred to as the Transfiguration. It’s a vision of sorts, a little peak behind the curtain into who Jesus is and where he is going. Though this is a stretch, what they’re witnessing is not unlike me finding out the score of those World Series games before I was able to watch them. Only in the disciples’ case, there will be a lot more pain and suffering involved. Indeed, the cross to which they are heading may look like defeat, but there is far more going on with this one they are following than they can possibly know

Look a little closer and you’ll see that Mark gives us three road signs along the way. They’re messages from God about Jesus. The first sign comes at his baptism. There’s a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The second sign comes in the middle of the journey

– here at the Transfiguration. It’s as if God is validating Jesus’ ministry. God says in effect, “This is *still* my Beloved Son, and with all that he’s done—his teaching and healing—I am well pleased indeed!” God adds an addendum: “Listen to him.”

The third sign is harder to find. It comes at the crucifixion and stands in stark contrast to the Transfiguration. Instead of Jesus’s clothes shining dazzling white, the soldiers gamble for his ragged clothing. There’s no direct voice from heaven. Rather, the religious authorities mock Jesus for claiming to be God’s Son. “Prove it,” they demand.

The Transfiguration ends. Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus is there alone with his disciples. The road to Jerusalem awaits them. No doubt, this will be the hardest road they’ve ever traveled. There will be lots of distractions along the way. There will be times when it looks like nothing but darkness and defeat. But perhaps the Transfiguration has given them a glimpse of light, a glimpse of whom they are really with and where they are really going. And maybe, just maybe, they will have a little more courage on those days when they’re genuinely worried about what is coming next.

There’s a story told—a parable of sorts—about a well-to-do man who got lost in a forest. The man been wandering for a long time. He was tired and hungry. The later it got, the more anxious he became. He was almost at the point of desperation when a forest ranger spotted him. As they met up, the ranger asked him two pointed questions: “Who are you, sir, and where are you going?” The well-to-do man was so relieved to be found and so impressed by the ranger’s questions, that he asked if he wanted to come and work for him. He offered to double his pay. Intrigued, the ranger said yes. And as a part of his assignment, he was to stay close to his new employer, and each day ask him the questions of the forest: “Who are you and where are you going?”

Friends, the next time you get anxious about what’s coming next in your life, remember the glimpse of the light of Christ on top of the mountain. You do well to consider who this Christ is and where he is going. You do well to listen to him! And even though taking up your cross and following him may seem like a squandered life in a self-centered world, keep in mind, in the kingdom of God, it is a lavish treasure. Amen.