FINISHING THE PICTURE

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey

February 22, 2009

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

As you can see from the heading of the bulletin and can surmise from the reading from the Gospel, today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent.

Several years ago one of those West Coast preachers who is famous for his "positive thinking" approach to Christianity suggested that Christians might think of the word *Lent* as an acronym. "Let *L-E-N-T*," he said, "stand for 'Let's Eliminate Negative Thinking.'"

Now there is a new twist on Lent! Let's eliminate negative thinking.

Lent does feel rather negative to us doesn't it? It is a season of introspection in which we are encouraged to face up to our sins and to engage in disciplines of prayer, study, and self-denial. The liturgical color for Lent is purple, a solemn color. Lent feels like a negative time. We may even resent Lent. There is in most of our lives quite enough seriousness and solemnity. There is enough struggle and difficulty and sadness and pain and death. Mother's got Alzheimer's. We've had to put Dad in a nursing home because he can no longer care for himself. Our oldest child has flunked out of college. The economy has tanked and if we haven't lost our job we may have experienced a diminishment of that nest egg we had put away for retirement, or the college fund for the kids has taken a serious hit.

Therefore, we may be seeking a positive experience when we come to church, something upbeat, something to help us escape the heaviness of our lives, the pain, the struggle. We may resent Lent. We want to come to church and hear that Jesus is going to rescue us, solve our problems, eliminate the negatives.

It may be some comfort to know that Simon Peter resented Lent. Well, not actually *Lent*. Of course, there was no Lent in those days. But he surely was of a mind that Jesus was going to lift him and his fellow disciples right out of their difficulties. But what Jesus told him was this, "The son of man must undergo great suffering and be rejected … and killed."[1] What Jesus told Peter was this, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."[2]

Peter resented these things which Jesus said to them. He was looking for a more upbeat message.

On the mountain in which Peter and James and John had an incredible religious experience, they saw a vision of Moses and Elijah, and Jesus, transfigured. They heard the very voice of God. They were surrounded with light. They wanted to stay there forever. Peter, perhaps speaking for the other two disciples, offers to build some booths so they might stay up there on that mountain, stay there in the euphoria of that religious high, there to eliminate negative thinking.

The way Mark tells the story we can figure out why Peter didn't want to go back down the mountain. If we had read to the end of chapter 9 we would have learned that at the foot of the mountain the other disciples along with crowds of people were waiting. They were arguing, Mark tells us, with some of the religious leaders. There was also a child there who was ill but the

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1[1] Mark 8:31. Subsequent citations are of Mark unless otherwise indicated.

2[2] 8:34-35.

disciples had been unsuccessful in helping him. Mark presents a dramatic contrast between what Peter and James and John experience on the mountain top and what they encounter at the foot of the mountain.

In the year 1519 the painter, Raphael, was commissioned to create a 13' X 9' picture of the Transfiguration. Rather than rely upon a multitude of assistants, as was common practice in that day, Raphael chose to do the work alone. He began with the upper portion of the canvas. He pictured Christ with hands upraised in blessing, dressed in white and bathed in light. On one side is Moses on the other Elijah. The awe-struck disciples are crouching on the ground shielding their eyes from the brightness of the light.

Unfortunately, in 1520 Raphael died leaving the painting unfinished. Other artists were engaged to finish the picture. They painted the scene at the foot of the mountain. They included a boy who is stricken in some terrible way. His eyes are rolled back in his head and the agitated crowd is pointing to him with looks of distress on their faces while others point toward the mountain top.[3]

The painting portrays two very distinct scenes: the events up on the mountain and the activities of the people at the foot of the mountain. I suppose at the time of Raphael's death the decision could have been made to simply leave the painting as the artist left it when he died. But, obviously, someone had been reading the Bible. Someone understood that what happened on the mountain top was related to what was happening in the valley below. In fact the artists finished the painting by having the brightness of the light surrounding Jesus radiate down to the crowds below. The artists understood that "the divine nature of Christ, awesome to contemplate and far beyond our … understanding belongs together with his human nature which enters our valleys …"[4]

Peter does not seem to get it. When Jesus talks about suffering and death Peter says, "This shall never happen to you." When Jesus talks about disciples suffering, Peter resists. When Jesus takes Peter up on the mountain top for a time of worship and prayer, Peter wants to stay there forever. It's only human. Don't we all have this picture that at its best this is the way life is supposed to be? If we could just work at it a little harder we could eliminate the negative thinking and purge ourselves of negative experiences and our lives would be perpetual sunshine.

Recently I sat on a Wednesday night at a church supper with two mothers of young children. They were talking about the maternal instinct that seeks to protect our children from painful experiences. We try to insulate them from the harsh things of the world. "But," one mother said, "finally we cannot protect them. They are going to hurt. They are going to struggle. They are going to experience pain. You just can't protect them from the realities of life."

Yet we operate with this idealistic notion that if we just read the right self-help books, then our lives can be all sunshine, no big bumps in the road, or only little ones.

The Christian life is not the upper portion of Raphael's canvas all by itself. The Christian life is not one continuous and uninterrupted mountain top experience because the living Christ is not only on the mountain. He is in the midst of all of life. He is even in the shadows, the low places, the valley, even the valley of the shadow of death.

What Peter experiences on the mountain is an insight into this truth. Jesus is the Christ of God but this does not exclude suffering and struggle and finally death. They are his disciples, called into his service, to live as his followers, but this does not mean no struggles, no doubt, no opposition, no failures, no pain.

3[3] Clarence D. Weaver, **Lectionary Homiletics**, (March 2000), p.4.

4[4] *Ibid.*

Finishing the picture of the Transfiguration means filling in the details of the everyday things over which the light of the Risen Christ also casts its rays. What Peter and James and John came to understand on the mountain is that God does not work apart from but within the struggles of everyday life.

For those disciples the mountain top was what the Irish call a "thin place." A thin place is an experience or occasion in which the veil between this world and the other world – God's larger world – is sheer, so sheer you can almost step through to the other side.[5] Or, with Barbara Brown Taylor, change the metaphor. A thin place is a door cracked open between this world and some other, an experience in which God is no absentee landlord but a very palpable presence.[6]

Lots of Biblical characters seem to have experienced thin places. Moses with the burning bush. Jacob wrestling all night with God. Job hearing the voice of God out of the whirlwind of his pain. The disciples in the valley following their mountain top experience. We tend to think such things are not available to us. But maybe they are.

Can you remember the first time you looked into the face of your newborn baby? I had forgotten until my first grandchild came along. When I looked into his face it all came back to me: the beauty, the wonder; those little fingers and toes and that pug nose and soft head of hair and little squeaks and grunts. Life! Straight from God. A thin place.

Worship can sometimes be a thin place. Not all the time, not every Sunday. But once in a while a piece of music or a hymn or a prayer or the experience of receiving the bread and cup – undeserving as we are – the tangible symbols of God's love for us. Or the sight of water running down over the head of a baby or an adult at baptism and the words, the *words*, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Thin places can also occur in dark valleys.

On September 10 of last year my beautiful daughter-in-law, died of leukemia after thirteen courageous and painful months fighting for all she was worth. It was the most tragic, the saddest thing that any of us had ever experienced. Her memorial service was in Westminster Church in Alexandria, Va. We sang, "A Mighty Fortress, is our God, a bulwark never failing." The preacher didn't run from reality but owned the pain of it and the absurdity that a 32 year old woman with her whole life before her should die this untimely death. Surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, I stood and as they affirmed for me the faith that I too claim but in those moments couldn't quite affirm for myself, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." In that painful moment, I experienced a peace, that as the scripture says, passes understanding. It was a thin place, the Christ of the mountain top was in the valley with me.

To finish the picture of the Transfiguration is to paint in the bottom of the canvas. For it is there that we see that the eternal impinging upon the temporal. God is not far removed from us. The struggles get fierce some time and the pain great or the doubt overwhelming. Then there is a thin place.

You cannot create these thin places. You can't conjure them up at will and when they come unexpectedly into our lives we cannot hold on to them much as we would like to and hard as we try. They are fleeting. But they are profound. They are a way of knowing that God is here not just in the occasional deeply meaningful and moving moment, but God is with us always.

5[5] See Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way,* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), p.59.

6[6] Taylor, p.58.