
Transfiguration: Change You Can Believe In!

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Last Epiphany – Year B

We hear the story of the Transfiguration today because things are changing!

Jesus' transfiguration sits the center of Mark's gospel. It is God's way of showing the disciples (and reader) that change is in the air.

Undoubtedly, the disciples know something about change. They have made drastic changes in their lives to follow Jesus, but like the rest of us (especially us Episcopalians) there is only so much change they can tolerate!

Woodrow Wilson once said, "If you want to make enemies, try to change something." At this point, I could insert a number of Episcopal jokes about change but that wouldn't be helpful!

Change is what this gospel text is all about and it starts with the very first words: "Six days later." You are probably asking, "What do these words have to do with change?" Well, if you flip back to Mark 8, you see what happened six days earlier.

Jesus asks the disciples who he is and Peter responds, "You are the Messiah."

And after Peter makes that confession, Jesus says the "Messiah must suffer and die," and Peter publicly rebukes Jesus for saying such a thing.

Jesus reprimands Peter (calling him Satan) and says you have got to change your understanding of the Messiah. The Messiah will not ride in as a king on a white horse, but will be a suffering servant.

John F. Kennedy once said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

Jesus is calling Peter to a new future, to change his understanding of God and to embrace a new way of life. Jesus is pointing Peter toward the cross and that is a difficult change to comprehend because it involves loss!

We have all heard the adage: "People resist change," but Harvard Professor Ron Heifetz says, "It is not really true. People are not stupid. People love change when they know it is a good thing. No one gives back a winning lottery ticket. What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change."

Listen again to what Peter says in today's gospel, let me build three booths – one for you, Moses, and Elijah. I want to hold on to what I have ... I want to hold on to the past ... because change involves suffering, death and loss!

We resist change because it involves loss!

If someone you love has died, or if you have changed jobs or careers, or if you have sent a child off to college, or if you just had a baby, you know that change (even good change) involves loss.

But our fear of loss is not a good enough reason to resist change.

Some of our great leaders are great because of their ability to acknowledge and adapt to change. Winston Churchill said, “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.”

Churchill is essentially quoting something Jesus says: “be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” The Greek word for “perfect” is “telos” and it means “maturing, becoming, or changing.”

Jesus is telling the disciples that change is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Change is at the heart of the spiritual life.

The first Sunday of Epiphany began with Jesus’ baptism, with Jesus coming up out of the water and God saying, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Epiphany ends today with the Transfiguration and God speaking again, “This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!”

The irony in Mark’s gospel is that those words occur a third time, but are spoken by someone other than God. The words are spoken by the Roman Centurion standing at the foot of the cross.

Maybe the Roman Centurion was the one who hammered the nails, perhaps he was the one who hoisted Jesus up to die, or he could have just been a soldier standing guard. Whatever the case, something in him changes and he says, “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

The cross has a way of changing people.

Christians are people of change. We read about it, we pray for it, and in our final hymn we will sing of our desire to be “changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place.”

So as we enter the season of Lent on Wednesday, change will be in the air. Many of us will use Lent as an opportunity to change some bad habits, while others will change their daily routines by taking on spiritual disciplines.

All of this change to help us focus on the cross.

And one thing we have learned from Christians who have walked before us (some 2,000 years) is that when you change your focus toward the cross it can change your life. One might even say, it is change we can believe in!