

THERE ARE NOT WORDS

“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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Six days earlier, Peter had exactly the right words. Jesus asked who people were saying he was: Elijah came one response, a prophet came a second, John the Baptist said a third. And then Jesus asked who *they* thought he was and Peter had exactly the right word: Messiah. But now, now it seems that there are not words.

Peter cannot find them: he does not know what to say. Despite having confessed Jesus as the Messiah only six days earlier, he finds himself at a loss for words - a bit flabbergasted at this transfiguration. He mumbles something about dwellings, but the text is clear, he did not know what to say . . .

There are not words.

Coming down the mountain, having said nothing we could hear, Jesus’ only words are ones of silence. Tell no one of what you have seen. Perhaps not so much of an issue since the event seems to defy language.

There are not words.

Until now Jesus has been healing, and teaching. Casting out demons, cleansing lepers, and upending settled structures of religion. Up to this point, Jesus has been your regular superhero. Minus the tights and cape, Jesus has been rescuing the distressed, working for justice, and defying human expectations. He is a Jesus we can all get behind. He is a Jesus we can wrap words around, tell stories about, figure out . . . , A man working to make things better.

But it does not last. These stories that make sense. These teaching and healings that give us hope for all that is wrong in our lives and in the world. They are shattered with a simple question: who do you say that I am?

Jesus neither confirms nor denies Peter's confession, but his command to tell no one seems an implicit confirmation. Moreover, he begins to teach that the Messiah must undergo great suffering and be killed. And all words fall apart.

We have come far enough with Jesus to know he will not be the Messiah we have been expecting. He will not break through the established tyranny of oppression with innumerable forces. He will not break down the palace doors or sit as king over and against the Romans. He fits no category we can create; he is neither king nor peasant, rabbi nor student. And we are left only with the words of Peter – you must be mistaken, this is not how the Messiah will be treated. And with Jesus' rebuke to Peter, Get behind me Satan, we are left in stunned silence.

There are not words.

The six days between Peter's confession and Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain must have been full of whispered questions, confused faces, and angry outbursts. While it is old news for us, who Jesus is and what he will undergo, it is new news for the disciples. They were not warned. Jesus called them saying come be fishers of men, follow me. And they left and followed. No questions asked. No hints about where this all might lead. Certainly no mention of death on a cross.

The disciples followed Jesus as he cast out unclean spirits and healed Simon's mother-in-law. They followed as he cured the paralyzed man and the one with a withered hand. And they must have thought they were involved in something useful, something beneficial to their community and the communities surrounding them.

They followed Jesus as he competed with the Pharisees in mental gymnastics and turned their deceptive reasoning around on them. They followed as he healed on the Sabbath and re-explained the laws of Moses. And they must have thought they were involved in something sensible – something that made more sense than they had imagined.

They followed Jesus as he walked on water, fed the multitudes, and told stories layered with meaning and judgment. And they must have thought they were involved with someone intelligent, someone who could take their places, take the people of Israel places.

And they must have been blown away by Jesus' first prophecy of his coming suffering and death. This is not what they had expected. Not what they signed up for, and not what they have been experiencing.

And there simply are not words.

No words to express questions heavy on their hearts. No words to express the confusion rattling around in their brains. No words to express the deep contradictions between their hopes and this new prophecy.

It is hard to imagine the state of Peter and James and John as Jesus leads them up the mountain a short six days later. Perhaps they have put it out of their minds. It is, after all, beyond comprehension, and we are certainly good at denying what we cannot fathom . . .

Or perhaps they have reasoned it away. It's possible *Jesus* didn't know what he was talking about. Clearly Peter and James and John have seen evidence to the contrary – *they* know what Jesus is capable of, perhaps it was a faltering of confidence on Jesus' part . . .

Or, perhaps it is all still weighing heavily on their hearts as they ascend with Jesus. Apart. Away from the crowds. Alone.

And then, the transfiguration. And once again there simply are not words. How does one describe what happened to Jesus when even the text can't. The text makes it clear that this is beyond anything we have seen or experienced – the clothes whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them, whiter than we can imagine.

But the rest of the details sparse. Moses and Elijah are there, but what they say to Jesus is left to the imagination.

There simply are not words.

There are no images with which to describe the transfiguration; no words that adequately capture the event, and attempts on our part to fully comprehend, fully imagine, fall short. It is simply beyond us – beyond words.

It's hard to know, then, what to do with this story. What to do with the Jesus portrayed in this event – the one changed beyond description. It's tempting, like Peter, to want to construct something. A paradigm in which to understand this event and this Jesus. A dwelling we can rest comfortably in – knowing who Jesus is and how this story fits in with the larger story. We want to situate this event in the life of Jesus and preach about how we can't stay on the mountain – we must go down – we must continue the work of Christ. In the absence of words, we would at least like to be busy.

But this isn't a story we fit into a paradigm. This isn't a Jesus we fit into a predetermined role. This is a story that shifts paradigms. A Jesus who redefines who we thought he was.

The transfiguration is the turning point. Halfway through Mark's recounting of Jesus as superhero we run headlong into the mountain of transfiguration and everything changes. Jesus is not the one who makes sense: the only place he will take us is to the cross.

Even though we know better, we are not unlike the disciples. We think we are following a Jesus who is beneficial for our community. We think we are following a Jesus who makes sense, a Jesus who can take us places, take our world places . . .

But Jesus' transfiguration reminds us that Jesus is beyond our words, beyond our comprehension. Jesus is greater than one who heals and teaches. More than one who casts out

demons and feeds people. Bigger than one who argues with Pharisees and upends religious structures.

We want to think in our studies and ministries that we have a handle on Jesus. We know how to be disciples, how to do Christ's work in the world. We think we're following Jesus. But I wonder sometimes if we allow ourselves to be seduced by words and forget the Jesus who defies language. I wonder if sometimes we allow ourselves to get lost in books and volunteer work and forget the Jesus we encounter on the mountain – the one who is beyond our attempts to follow – the one who completely shifts our paradigms.

I wonder if sometimes we forget . . . there are not words.