

"An Awesome Responsibility"

Transfiguration of Our Lord
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, February 19, 2012
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Mark 9:2-9

The movies that probably made Michael J. Fox a household name many years ago were the *Back to the Future* series. Remember those? Three movies with the same title and the same premise and plot -- a madcap scientist perfects a machine capable of traveling through time. A teenage boy, enter Michael J. Fox, uses the machine and what happens is good entertainment and fun.

But for all of its warm frivolity and lightheartedness, these movies ponder one serious theme: how possessing knowledge of the future could create an awesome responsibility in the present. In the first movie of the series, for instance, the boy has been warned not to attempt to alter the future in any way. Indeed, as the plot unfolds, the boy has to work vigorously to insure that the future he has already seen and lived does, in fact, develop. His mother and father, for example, are having difficulty as teenagers developing a romantic relationship, and the boy has to employ every ounce of his inventiveness to insure that the conditions are created which will lead to their mutual attraction, eventual marriage, and, paradoxically, the boy's own birth. Because the boy knows the future, he bears its burden and is compelled to work for its fulfillment.

The movie is playful, to be sure, as are the sequels, but the insight is a serious one. Knowledge of the future creates momentous responsibility in the present. Imagine a doctor checking the lab reports one more time, to find that they say the same thing as before -- the disease has spread again, and this time beyond the bounds of containment. For one moment in time, this doctor is the one person in the world who knows what the future holds for her patient, that her profession can do nothing more and that life for her patient is about to be measured in weeks, not years. Although some might think this knowledge would lessen the physician's responsibility, for the patient is now outside the limits of her skill and of medicine's power, the physician knows otherwise.

Or imagine being one of the executives of Kodak in these last weeks as decisions are made about discontinuing the manufacturing of cameras. You know people are going to lose their jobs. You are keenly aware of the anguish these decisions will cause families. You hold a secret about the future that makes it hard to greet those you know. You feel the burden which comes in knowing the future.

Or, if any of you have ever had to face a serious illness, or been in a near-fatal accident, you know how that experience can alter your life in the present. We don't have time this morning for me to recall the whole story of the infection that nearly killed me when I was but 20 years old. But ever since that time, I have looked death squarely in the face without fear because I faced my own mortality and, through that encounter, my concept of time as both precious and urgent has been forever shaped. My knowledge of the

future, and loss of fear over it, has placed upon me the responsibility of making each day that is a gift, count for something.

The transfiguration of Jesus is also a glimpse into the future. But it is not just a glimpse into *any* future; it is a clear vision of the ultimate future, God's future, and, as such, it creates for all disciples of Jesus a serious responsibility. The event occurs in the middle of Jesus' ministry, indeed, almost literally in the middle of Mark's Gospel. The account is filled with symbolism. Peter and James and John are apart with Jesus on a high mountain, the symbolic place of God's revelation. Jesus' garments begin to shine with a brilliant whiteness, the sign of God's presence. Jesus converses with the great figures in Jewish history, Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, representing the prophets – the two great thrusts of Judaism. And suddenly, there is only Jesus, and the voice of God, the same voice which spoke at Jesus' baptism, again declaring him to be the "Son of God."

Mark reports Peter's reaction to all of this. Peter says: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Some commentators argue that what Peter wanted to do was to preserve the moment, to freeze time, to make the experience last forever. Perhaps so, but I think there is more to it than that, for, you see, Peter's suggestion of building dwellings, or booths as some translations say, was itself a recognition that he was face-to-face with the future. The Jewish Feast of Booths had come to mean, not only the remembrance of the days when God dwelled with his people in the tents in the wilderness, but also a looking forward to the day when God and his people, people of all nations, would again "tabernacle" together. Peter looked at the shining appearance of Jesus, saw Moses and Elijah, and assumed that this long-expected day had finally come. This was the Messianic Age. The future had arrived.

But Peter was, once again, mistaken. The future had been glimpsed. This epiphany, this manifestation on the mountain, was truly a foretaste of the Resurrection. But, the future had not fully arrived. I think that is the point of the gospel writer's placement of the story in the middle of Jesus' ministry. There is still a journey ahead into a valley filled with demons to be cast out, disputes to be settled, rejection to be faced, burdens to be borne, suffering to be endured, a cross to be carried, and a tomb to be resurrected. The future had been seen; now it shaped the present with urgent responsibility.

Mark also tells us that Peter said what he did about the booths because he was afraid, and well he should have been. People who have seen the future and who know what it holds are compelled to live differently in the present. They are now accountable to that future, and they can no longer stroll uncaringly through their days. They **know** what tomorrow holds, and they must live each present day in the sure knowledge of what is yet to be. That day on the mountain Peter saw into the future, and what he saw was that this Jesus was the Lord of all time and all creation. Now he must go back to the valley full of illness, danger, suffering with the awareness that, after what he had seen and experienced, his life would be forever changed, for his life now had the purpose of Jesus imprinted on it. Jesus' mission was now his mission. His words would become Peter's words. Jesus' life of service was now Peter's, and James' and John's and all the rest's. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus had been proclaiming, was now a reality and they would forever live with one foot firmly in that Kingdom.

Is it too much of a jump to claim that we are joined to that little band on the mountain? Maybe our revelation of Jesus wasn't dramatic like that, but we have seen him – in the stories we tell about his ministry; in the forgiveness we can know before his table; in the grace we all know in the waters of baptism. Jesus has been revealed to us as the Christ, the Lord of Life, the Risen and Living Lord, through scripture and sacraments, and through daily encounters with Him when our eyes are open and our ears attuned to his voice.

And because of that, we are, like the disciples, joined to that future and bear responsibility for it. We have been transformed from those who walk this earth with our own agendas, relying on our own powers and inventiveness, to be God's children, marked with the cross of Christ forever, and whose lives are transformed into mission builders for God's Kingdom. Now my gifts are not mine -- they never were -- they are God's to use. Now my time is not totally my time, it is God's time, and I pray he directs me to use it wisely. Now the future is not just about retirement funds and travel plans, but about a Kingdom free from all the encumbrances of this world. Now the grave is not my last stop, but the beginning of a whole new, full life in Christ. Do you see how knowing the future changes the way we live today? We who have seen the Risen Christ know that in him the image of God has been restored into every one of his children, and so we seek to feed and clothe and shelter all those who bear that image, however humbly or weakly.

I like the perspective of one little boy I read about recently. It seemed this little fellow played regularly near a mission compound in Kenya and was befriended by one of the missionaries there. One day, the boy asked the missionary, "Do you recognize me?" Surprised, the missionary replied, "Why, yes, of course!" The boy looked puzzled for a moment and then explained, "I've become a Christian, and I didn't know if you would know who I was." Somehow, he expected that since he felt so changed on the inside, his appearance must be transformed as well.

He got it partially right. Changed on the inside through being joined to Christ, it is not our appearances that have changed, but our very lives. We have seen the future and it belongs to God. Now we carry the responsibility to live in our today's with that confident knowledge and with a firm faith in God's future.

AMEN.

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