

MUM\$ THE WORD¹
Mark 9: 2-9
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
February 22, 2009

Bob Schieffer of CBS News has lived long enough to become a kind of sage, much like Eric Sevareid became in his later years. So when Bob Shieffer says something, most people pay attention. He pointed out that this year's big winner at the Westminster Dog Show was the oldest dog in the show, a 10-year-old Sussex Spaniel name Stump. In human years Stump would be 70, which is like a 70-year-old walking off with the title of Mr. Universe. Stump posed for four hours the other day for photographers from the AARP!

It made Bob Schieffer feel good to see Stump win. I'm sure it makes many in our congregation feel good. We have plenty of people who could walk off with many a title, but ask their age? Mum\$ the word!

I

In our Old Testament reading for today, mum\$ the word. We find a wise and sensitive Elisha preparing for the death of the older prophet Elijah. They travel to Bethel where his former congregation looks at Elijah

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, February 22, 2009.

and realizes he is dying. They whisper to Elisha that the old man is looking pretty bad; he's on his last leg. Elisha replies, "Yes, I know" — the word. They travel on to Jericho, and the reality of impending death follows Elijah like a shadow. His former congregation in Jericho can see it clearly, and they whisper to Elisha that their beloved Elijah surely can't last long. "Yes, I know" — the word, says Elisha. The impending reality of death may be inescapable, but let it remain unnamed. Some realities seem too large and too powerful to be named.

Maybe the older prophet wants to spare his younger protégé the pain of goodbye, so he says, "Elisha, stay here — you don't need to travel with me." Yet Elisha repeatedly stays loyal to his older colleague. He will not leave him, not now while his heart is breaking.

When they reach the Jordan River there are more prophets, but they do not take Elisha aside. They keep their distance, perhaps seeing that there is nothing more to be said. On the bank of the Jordan, Elijah takes his mantle from around his shoulders, rolls it up like a towel, and snaps it at the water. And in the way of miracle stories, the water parts so that they can cross over to the other side. When they find themselves alone, Elijah says, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you."

What a question! And how many answers Elisha could have given! What do I need? I need to know that I can do this job! I need to know that I am not too young, too inexperienced, too uninformed, too much of a follower instead of a leader! I need to know that I have you to turn to for advice. I need to know what to say when people turn to me for a word from God! Mostly, I need you!

But what Elisha ends up saying is, "Please leave me a double portion of your spirit." It is almost like Elisha is saying, "I am only half the man you are, so I will need a double portion of your spirit just to break even."

Then the story describes the death of the old man this way: a chariot of fire and horses of fire separate the two men. A whirlwind gathers up Elijah and lifts him like Dorothy being lifted out of Kansas to the Land of Oz. And the younger man, Elisha, shouts out, "Father, Father, the chariots of Israel and its horseman!" When the vision is over, the younger man tears his shirt in two in the traditional expression of grief.

When we lived in Cambridge, our next-door neighbor was Miss Ruth Valetta Jones, the great niece of Frederick Douglas. She was 90 years old when we first met, and just over 100 when she died, and she loved to tell stories of her life and of Cambridge; she told freedom stories. She would regale us with the story of how her great aunt and uncle, slaves in Virginia,

walked off the plantation during the Civil War and were taken in to a Union encampment. They worked in the camp, and followed the Union General back to Cambridge after the war, where his family assisted them in becoming established members of the community. They worked and used their income to buy property and to bring their extended family one by one to live in Cambridge.

As Miss Jones was approaching her 100th birthday, she would often say, "Do you hear that? I hear that chariot coming to get me! I'm gonna ride on that chariot all the way to heaven!" She believed it, and who's to say she wasn't more right than those of us who knew she was dying of old age? For her, Elijah's chariot was coming for her, and she was ready.

But we didn't talk much about that. Mum's the word.

II

There's another biblical story in which mum's the word. This one is about Jesus, and we read it each year on the last Sunday of Epiphany, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. It is a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus. It is a fitting story for us to ponder just before Lent.

And "ponder" is the word, for the Transfiguration is something to ponder, not understand. Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John, the three who seem to be closest to him among the twelve, and they climb to

the top of a high mountain. It was a divine summit meeting, where the three disciples have a vision of Jesus speaking with two great figures in Jewish history: Moses and Elijah. Then Peter, the ultimate extrovert, babbles out: "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Mark continues with one of the great understatements of the Bible. He says of Peter: "For he did not know what to say."

And then comes the cloud and the voice, like the voice that came upon Jesus months earlier at his baptism: "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him." Listen to him. It is that voice we come to church to hear, the voice above every voice, the voice above, beneath, beyond, in spite of, my voice. Such is our longing, to hear the voice of Christ speaking for our day and our situation.

The vision we are given on the Mount of Transfiguration is a mystical, not magical vision. It is truth like Elijah's whirlwind, like Miss Jones's chariot, like the dream of a new world amid an old creation consumed by greed, wrecked by war, and soiled by treachery. It is the vision of a world ready for the dream of God, where Christ reaches out over the divide of centuries and speaks with us, prods us, inspires us, moves us to make a difference.

Whatever we make of this story, whatever the disciples made of the experience, Jesus had something to say when they were coming down the mountain. ~~“Mum”~~ the word, he said. ~~“Say~~ nothing about this, until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead.+ Sometimes we need to stop trying to explain things and just experience the glory of the presence of God in our midst.

[CHOIR ANTHEM]

III

And then what? We enter the valley of difficulty, far from the vision, but the vision still lives within us. We enter the world of falling stock markets and falling job markets and falling interest rates and falling house prices and falling hopes and falling ideals. We enter the world of 2009, in some ways not too much different from the world of Jesus and his disciples.

What do we do with an experience like the Transfiguration? Forget it? Assume that it is not real? Imagine that mystical experiences are only psychological crutches to help us face the hard realities of this world? Conceive of God as a projection and of religion as a fantasy? Some do, and that is certainly an option!

But there is another way, another road just as honest and just as healthy. Let me tell you a story about Thomas Merton, the brilliant Trappist Monk who was a poet and the author of many books on spirituality. In his classic book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1968), he tells about standing on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, the center of the shopping district in downtown Louisville, KY. Here is what he says: *I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.... now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*²

It was that kind of radiance that the disciples saw in Jesus at the Transfiguration. The gospel of Mark says his clothes were as bright as super-bleached laundry. Matthew says that they radiated blinding light³, and Luke compared it to a flash of lightening⁴.

IV

Maybe what they were seeing there on top of the mountain was not a sign of his divinity, but a sign of his true humanity! Maybe all humanity radiates that kind of light when we let down our defenses and unmask our

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), pp. 156-57.

³ Matthew 17: 2.

⁴ Luke 9: 29.

societal roles. Maybe what Merton saw on the corner of Fourth and Walnut is what each of us has on the corner of Park and Salisbury, if only we could let it out, let it shine, let it illuminate a world that desperately needs that light.