FILMING THE TRANSFIGURATION

Mark 9:2-9

February 14, 2021

 Paparazzo Peter.

He’s peering at Moses, Elijah and Jesus. This is a career-maker. But there’s a problem. No camera. No film. No nothing.

 We can sympathize with Peter’s predicament. Let’s be frank: Peter would’ve done us all a big favor if he had been better prepared. We could visit his shrine today built to immortalize the moment if only he had been ready.

 Imagine your grasp of history without Abraham Zapruder’s 26 seconds of film, shot with an 8-mm camera on November 22, 1963. We’d be stuck with Oliver Stones revisionist montage in his film “JFK”. Or without the grainy footage of Neil Armstrong taking “one small step for man” replete with scratchy audio.

 The Zapruder film, the Apollo 11 footage, the census data stored by the government, risk disintegration or obsolescence as the years progress. We can launch photographs of the kids through cyberspace (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others I don’t even know) but we are losing the photographs of our own childhoods, not to mention our ancestors’ childhoods, due to humidity, sunlight, and aging chemicals on paper.

This hurts. It hurts because we have such a hunger to hang on to history. And we’re losing that history. This, despite the fact that more and more people are documenting more and more information every day. You better believe that if President Kennedy rode through Dallas today, Abraham Zapruder would be among HUNDREDS of ordinary people preserving the moment on film! The “memory book” business is booming as young mothers search craft stores for the latest in acid-free paper and “bookkeeper archival mist.” The “home movie to CD” business is thriving, as the Bell and Howell generation are warned that “gelatin emulsion” could be eating away at their priceless memories.

We want to preserve every special moment, and yet . . . armed with camcorders in one palm, hermetically sealed scrapbooks in the other arm, and countless files filled with images and personnel data in our computers, aren’t we in danger of missing something even more monumental?

Missing – in our craving to capture it – the God-given moment itself?

Peter, of course, had no camcorder, no hand-held micro tape recorder to capture the extraordinary moment he witnessed along with James and John. It was literally a mountaintop experience, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for three ordinary Joes who, as disciples, were still searching for a clue.

Peter, understandably, was absolutely awestruck. It was to have been a quiet retreat, a time apart from the crowds, but an extraordinary event was unfolding, a moment in history so sacred that Peter, as Vice President in Charge of Doing Something, had to do something. So he proposed building a booth or kiosk or shrine—whatever – to preserve the moment. We’re not told how he was going to do this, whether he had hammer and saw at the ready, or a few fisherman’s tools in his belt. Your options are limited when all you’ve got is a sewing needle (for your nets, you see.) But then Peter was never one to let details get in the way of a dream.

A cloud dimmed the moment, however, before Peter could throw anything together. Out of the cloud thundered a voice: “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him” (v. 7).

God didn’t say, “Get a shot of the three of them over by that cedar tree.” Didn’t say, “Be sure to capture the moment!”

Just, “Listen to *Him*.”

Like tourists who see Paris through their viewfinders, Peter, who wanted to keep the moment from passing, was in danger of passing the moment. Let’s face it: we, too, are easily distracted. Our lives are noisy. Televisions, radios, DVDs, quad speakers, and iphones fill our world with incessant sound. Hard to hear the voice of God these days.

Just as cameras can be programmed to print the date on the image in order to remember exactly when an event occurred, Mark’s gospel tells us that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to this mountain exactly six days after reminding them that “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of gospel will save it” (8:35). It’s not a bad idea to ask ourselves, “What are we really losing and what are we really keeping, in the big picture?” What will it profit to preserve our life’s history, if we forget the fundamental reason for remembering?

I remind you that the Transfiguration marks the last week of the Season of Epiphany. (“Epiphany” means “showing forth.) And for Mark, the Transfiguration is in many ways the mother of all epiphanies, since it reveals Jesus as a prophet par excellance, and above all, as God’s Beloved Child, to be listened to above Moses and the Prophets (the prophets symbolized by Elijah here.) Remember, ‘suddenly they looked around and saw no one with them, but only Jesus.’ Moses and Elijah had faded away, and Jesus alone was with them. The Law and the Prophets fade into the background as Jesus Christ takes center stage in our focus.

The episode takes place at almost the exact midpoint of Mark’s Gospel, as well as at its highest geographical elevation (the reference to Caesarea Philippi in ch. 8 suggests that this mountain is likely Mount Hermon, the highest peak in Syro-Palestine.) In broad strokes, the first 8 chapters of Mark describe Jesus’ ministry of healing and liberation and the last 8 chapters describe the descent into His passion and death, arriving finally at the stunning news of the empty tomb. The Transfiguration stands as the fulcrum, the pivot point between these two great movements of God’s salvation history.

So, in the context of the overall narrative, Mark’s central point in the Transfiguration story is this: the suffering and death of Jesus may at first appear as an unthinkable, desecrating defeat, but it’s actually a step toward a dramatic, subversive victory. (Isn’t that delicious?) Jesus will now venture into the shadows of death – precisely in order to scatter those shadows once and for all, overcoming them in the end with shimmering light.

Jesus will go down into the depths of what can only be called the godforsaken – precisely in order to lift the world up into renewed intimacy with God, the sort of intimacy familiar to Moses (the one who “knew God face to face” (Dt. 34:10); familiar to Elijah (the one who heard God in “the sound of sheer silence” ( 1 Kings 19:12); and familiar to Jesus, God’s beloved child.

So: take heart! And ‘”Listen to him: that is, continue to trust and walk with Jesus, following in His footsteps and taking up His mantle, even through the path ahead now seems strewn with danger and disgrace. Radiant beauty awaits – on the other side of Golgotha.

We ought to call a moratorium on this memory mania. Home movies may jog our memories of family birthday parties and graduations and weddings and so forth, but here’s the danger. Focusing on the image, we forget about its meaning. We are losing the sense of the sacred in the mundane. More weddings are ruined by overzealous photographers than by spending more time enjoying the wedding banquet and mingling with the wedding guests.

So throw away the camcorder and go live. Sacramentalize the mundane. Divinize the moment. Listen for the voice of God.

See, we go through life too busy trying to film the Transfiguration. We look but don’t see; we hear but we don’t listen. So what? So what if we have acid-free scrapbooks filled with ticket stubs and report cards and pressed corsages, if we have forgotten what made those moments so sacred?

God’s advice is to listen. Listen to the children, listen to life, listen for the sacred, divine the divine. Listen to Jesus.

Amen