

February 11, 2018
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Mark 9:2-9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Stranger Things

This sermon will make more sense if you watch TV. I do, and so it was that that the gospel story for today made me think of TV. Even if you don't watch TV, you still might agree that today's story is one of the stranger things that is included in the gospels: what with its small group of friends who have an mystifying experience that they can't talk about; this story that is full of allusions and people from another era: the cloud, Elijah and Moses; this story that is heavy with supernatural effects and awash with fear; "They were terrified," the gospel tells us.

This story, which is known as "The Transfiguration" is certainly one of the stranger things we hear in church. Every year we hear it, three of the four gospels include it and one version of it is always included in our annual cycle of readings around this time of year. It's a strange episode, and also something of a season finale, in terms of the church calendar. The season premier for Lent is Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, this year it's on February 14th, and it's not something you can watch later online. Lent begins with live bodies being marked with the detritus of death. Remember you are dust. Happy Valentine's Day.

But before then, this Sunday, this story, this strange story, with Jesus, wearing clothes that are "dazzling white." Of all the strange things about "The Transfiguration" this is one of the stranger ones, this specific, sartorial attention, this detail about what Jesus wore. Nowhere else in the gospel does fashion merit such attention. Nowhere else do gospel writers make such a point of Jesus' garb. Here, not only do we get a red carpet adjective, "dazzling,"—the word choice a remarkable change in style for so blunt a screenwriter as Mark—here, not only are Jesus' clothes given an elaborate adjective, it's followed by an out of this world superlative, and ends with mention of detergent, "his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."

That phrase, that dazzling white with bleach, is what really made think of TV. Not a TV show but a commercial, one of one my favorite commercials from the Super Bowl last week. Did anyone else watch TV last Sunday? I wonder if anyone else remembers this particular detergent commercial—actually, it was a series of commercials. They began with a guy with a beard. He may have looked familiar to you, he was certainly in familiar commercial settings: sometimes driving a car, sometimes in a bar, sometimes leaning over a fence post. He'd say, "Yep, you think this going to be a commercial for a luxury automobile, or a beer, or insurance, or shaving cream. It's not. Look at these clothes. There's not a stain on them. Look at how the shine. You think this is a commercial for auto repair? It's a Tide ad." So it was that this year, when I read the Transfiguration story, with Jesus in clothes that are dazzling white, I thought, "It's not the gospel, it's a Tide ad."

Those Tide ads kept popping up throughout the course of the Super Bowl. There were different settings, but always the same bearded guy. You might have recognized him, even if he wasn't wearing what he usually does on the TV show that gives this sermon its title. On that show he usually wears a tan police uniform that's a bit too tight. If you watch that show, you recognized him: it was Officer Hopper from "Stranger Things."

I was something of a late comer to "Stranger Things." I didn't know if I wanted to watch it, because I heard it was scary. It is scary. And very fine TV. I'm not giving anything away by explaining its concept: that there is something malevolent, monstrous and viral, spreading underground, that it is also in bureaucratic office buildings, where scientific and governmental

institutions supposedly keep it top secret and safe, but actually tinker with it and cannot contain it; invariably it escapes. This dark force and its foot soldiers grow in number and size, consume land and creatures, including humans. Many are ignorant of its existence. This doesn't stop them from being destroyed by it. There are some people who are aware of it, see it, this thing, this stranger thing that is trying to take over. On the show, the ones who see it call it "the upside down."

I don't believe in the monsters of "Stranger Things," but I think they are an incredibly apt metaphor for evil, which is all too real, and which operates in just those ways, ways of which we are often unaware, but which cause such violence, destruction, and death. I think of evils like racism, sexism, self-hatred, egotism, environmental degradation. I think of these and other evils and I think how, as in that TV show, they spread underground, are stored in institutions and also escape from them; how they obliterate habitats and neighborhoods and children and grown-ups. The world in which these evils flourish is upside down.

I think that even more than its nostalgia for the eighties, "Stranger Things" strikes a chord because of the power of that metaphor, which it makes concrete, because it takes monsters seriously. Watching the show, the vague sense of dread that you are dragging around is validated. Your ominous awareness that something is not right, is terribly not right, is confirmed. You can, and do, feel scared, when you watch it. And you cheer for characters in the show who are afraid, who know to be afraid, because they have seen this evil thing, because they have seen the world as upside down.

And all of this makes me think of church, because Christian faith takes evil seriously. Again and again Jesus had things to say about how upside down the world was, how institutions and individuals act so very differently from what God intends. When we see this, when we see the world as messed up as it is, see ourselves as messed up as we are, we can be overwhelmed with fear. The disciples felt it. On the mountaintop and in many other places in the gospels the disciples, men and women, were terrified, terribly afraid. We can take heart in that, when we are, too. We have more than escapist TV as companions in our fear.

And we have something more to watch; we have something more to see. Our eyes cannot be shut to evil, but with eyes of faith we see something else as well. Christian faith sees that the world is upside down, and we see the Beloved Son, the one who has come to set it right, to defeat violence, destruction, and death. Eyes of faith see Jesus, the Christ, clad in white, more dazzling than any earthly detergent could make him. It's not an ad, it's a preview, it's a sneak peek of the series finale: the resurrection. Explaining the concept of Transfiguration does give away the ending—and how good it is to know it, how good it is to be here.

Above all, this is what Transfiguration tells us: the story—our story—doesn't end in darkness. There is terror, yes, but triumph, too, a final triumph that is yet to be revealed and an unmistakable flash of it even now. This setting is not all it seems, not all there is, not all you thought. Sort of like those Tide ads. It's not what you thought, Transfiguration says, it's even stranger. It's not what you thought, the gospel says, and the surprise of this is cause for mirth, cause for laughter, cause for joy. Light will triumph over darkness. The one who said, "Let light shine in the darkness," shines also in our hearts, giving us the light of knowledge of the glory of God, who shines, so may we, too.