



Time out of time

Mark 9:2-9

AS HE CAME down from the mountain of the transfiguration with his disciples, Jesus commanded them to tell no one what they had seen “until after the Son of Man [has] risen from the dead.” When they did begin to speak about what had happened on the mountain, they must have discovered the wisdom of Jesus’ admonition. Indeed, one suspects that this is when the expression, “Well, I suppose you had to be there” might have been born. No matter what we say about the transfiguration, we never quite seem able to explain it.

A century ago it was fashionable to account for it in terms of natural phenomena. On a snowcapped mountain Jesus encountered a pair of men dressed in white robes. The glare of the sun reflected on their garments by the snow was so dazzling that the disciples thought . . . When we try to untangle the transfiguration, often the explanations begin sounding even more improbable than the gospel story itself.

Recent excavations in literary archaeology have suggested that the transfiguration is a misplaced resurrection story. The white robes, resplendent light and transformed personages make that sound reasonable enough. Some have gone so far as to identify the story as a refugee from the apocryphal Gospel of Peter; after wandering from church to church, the story finally found a canonical home in the middle of Mark’s Gospel. But why would Mark, whose avoidance of resurrection accounts is both infamous and problematic, insert an Easter story at the midpoint of his Gospel?

Like Peter, we use whatever tools we have at hand to come to terms with the transfiguration. If the idea of hammering together three booths and enclosing the event within the celebration of *Sukkoth* suggests that Peter was straining to find a fit for what he had witnessed, surely we can

be sympathetic. Mark gently explains that the apostle really didn’t know what to say. Nothing in our experience prepares us for what Mark describes. Nowhere among the notions by which we order our lives is there a category where the transfiguration might “fit.” It does not even fit particularly well into Mark’s Gospel. Until this point, Mark has maintained a frenetic pace, portraying Jesus as moving “immediately” from task to task—casting out a demon, healing Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, teaching, telling a paralytic to take up his pallet and walk. Jesus’ story is narrated with furious intensity.

Now, on the mountaintop, time evaporates like mist before the dawning of a great glory. If the pace of the journey has left us panting, now the height is too great for us to catch our breath. This is not just one more story among many. This is not just another moment following in the sequence of events. Here on the mountain time is abandoned for a moment of eternity.

Though some speak of the transfiguration as a theophany, what irrupts is not some offstage *deus ex machina* but the *Christus Victor* who invades time from his throne at the end of time. What is revealed on the mountain is not who Jesus is but what he will be. Elijah appears as the harbinger of the Messianic reign, Moses as an eschatological figure of royalty; together they verify the enthronement of Jesus as the Christ of God. This transfiguring event occurs out of season, however, in the time of “not yet.”



Jesus has predicted his rejection, suffering and death, and summoned those who would follow him to “take up their cross” (8:31-34). But how can anyone face such an undertaking without a meaningful vision of where it will lead? Mark does not point to a happy ending in these early chapters of his Gospel. But to his congregation, themselves rejected, suffering and facing death, he hints of a vision of rejection, suffering and death transfigured in unimaginable glory. There will be a time for a *theologia gloria*, but that time is “not yet.” The fulfillment of all things has a way of overflowing its banks and invading our time.

In one of his essays, J. R. R. Tolkien distinguishes between different kinds of climaxes. The tragic tale, with its sorrowful ending, he calls a “*dyscastrophe*”; for “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” he coins the word “*eucastrophe*”: the blessed cata-

clysm by which lovers are reunited after many tests and trials, or the true king is separated from all pretenders and finally ascends the throne. “In such stories,” Tolkien says, “when the sudden ‘turn’ comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of the story, and lets a gleam come through.” Mark’s “*eucastrophe*” cracks open his story at

midpoint, leaving us stunned and speechless. Like Peter, we press into service whatever transformations, transmutations or transmogrifications we have known, clumsily likening them to what we have glimpsed on the mountain. We say what we can say and wait “until after the Son of Man be risen from the dead.”

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