

Sermon: Somewhere Between Past and Future**Scripture: Mark 9:2-9****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 11, 2024**

When you look back over your history, what are those significant, pivotal moments when you would say that God was active, present, involved in your life?

A few years before I came here in 2015 there was a significant stirring up and shaking down within me, right around my 40th birthday, the proverbial mid-life crisis, where I suddenly felt suffocated by my work, like the grind of it was going to grind me down and be my undoing. As I was going through that up there in Vermont, this church here was in the process you were in during those same years and when the time was ripe as I put together my profile to leave Vermont you all posted your position here in Winchester and voila, here we are.

In retrospect, I could see how God's hand was at work even within my mid-life crisis to stir me up, to hold me through, to close old doors and to open new ones that needed opening. I've shared this with some of you, but it all culminated in my coming here for an interview in the summer of 2015 and having lunch with Fred Green and one of the chairs of the search committee, Rob Skinner. At one point Rob, knowing I went to William and Mary, asked if I by any chance knew his cousin's wife Ann and I said "no, way, you don't mean Ann Skinner!" And he said, "that's exactly who I mean!" I not only knew Ann but she was one of my closest friends at William and Mary and I was like, "Ok well, not sure we have much choice but to seal this deal, cause obviously this is where God's been guiding things! Thanks God for the advanced planning!"

It's often in retrospect that we can see best God's activity in our lives. It's a good prayer exercise to occasionally stop and remember such occasions and how God's faithful presence has been at work in our lives, and tuck those memories into our pockets for when things in the future get rough and we have a hard time recognizing God's presence and activity. After all, it IS very specific to our religious tradition – this seeing God at work in retrospect, in our histories, and allowing that to inform our future. Other traditions proclaim God is most evident in awakening to the present moment, that if we can let go of the past and resist projecting our minds into the future we can awaken to an awareness of God. Such a practice has its place for sure, but the practice of Christianity involves looking back at the past and leaning into the hope of the future.

Christianity arose out of the particular story of Judaism and the Hebrew people and God's covenant with them, their liberation from slavery, their finding of the promised land, which eventually led to one Jewish man, Jesus, opening that relationship for us non-Jews. It is a history that we read and study and we meditate upon and pray within, and it's a story that does not have its ending in us or this day and time but always looks forward and promises a future to come, giving us hope. We live our lives in the tension, as the theologian Jurgen Moltmann suggests, "between the uttering of the promise and the redeeming of the promise." P. 104.

Others have framed it that we live between the earth down here and God up there and the revelation of God is a spatial revealing of God's presence here. In the Judeo-Christian world-view, the revelation of God comes as a process. What is revealed is that we, the world, is in process and God is revealed in the past in such a way that opens the door to the future. It's where the whole notion of a spiritual

journey comes from. We are going from one time back then to another time to come, coming from one reality and moving towards a new reality with God.

This is what the story of the Transfiguration that you heard Rachel read is all about. It's a moment in time when Jesus stands as this link between the past and the future. He's on the mountaintop and the revelation of God there is a revelation that draws the past through the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the great prophets of the Hebrew people, into the present with Jesus who becomes radiant as the sun which is his future resurrection being revealed. The past pressing forward into the future. The present is but a passing moment. And what does bumbling Peter want to do? He wants to capture the moment, to arrest this rushing from the past into the future by building three tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus and stop it up into the present moment. And God says to Peter "you know what, Peter, here's what I want you to do – just listen to him!" And Jesus stops glowing and Elijah and Moses disappear and Jesus moves on, down the mountain and toward Jerusalem with Peter and the other two disciples stumbling along behind trying to keep up.

This is how we know God and God's purposes for this world, not so much in moments of spiritual awakening but in where God's been and in where God's going, and otherwise it's just glimpses along the way. If you read through the New Testament you'll see this everywhere you look. Jesus is always coming and going, from the beginning coming among us at his birth and his family fleeing for their lives as refugees and then in his public ministry, always on the go, on the road, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head", calling his disciples to follow along with him, go go, go. Peter wants to slow him down and build three tents. James and John want to sit still and established at his right and left hand and Jesus is

baffled by them all because those are positions of stasis and he is all about the movement, the process cause that's who God is too. Again, Jurgen Moltmann says in his book "Theology of Hope": "the God spoken of in the Old and New Testaments is not [so much] God within or God beyond but... God with FUTURE as His essential nature, a God we cannot really have simply in us or over us but always and only before us calling us forth and forward...."p. 16, God in our past pushing us forth, God in our future drawing us onward.

And this is how we enter into Lent. We speak of it as a journey, a moving forth, a beginning with an ash cross imposed on the forehead on Wednesday and an ending (at least a seeming ending!) with Jesus entering Jerusalem and being crucified on Good Friday. Think about that for a moment. What they had to do to this God of the future, this God of pressing forward from the past into the future, they tried to pin him down to a standstill. And we know how that went in the end.

So there are 40 days of Lent between now and then and we're invited to intentionally enter into that journey that is still in our future but that will come and go. And we are to ask ourselves and ask one another, what are you taking on that journey and what is the terrain that you will traverse? Can you be intentional about how you hold this journey of 40 days through Lent to make yourself more conscious of God's presence in your life, God's activity across your past and God's promises for your future? It's an opportunity to walk through these coming days with a little more intention, a little less numbness and routine and habit, to shake things up a bit. You can do this in many ways but there are 4 traditional Lenten practices –

- Fasting, from food or drink or social media or whatever else tends to numb us to life.

- Prayer, taking on an intentional new practice of prayer, like scripture reading or journaling or centering prayer...
- Repentance, taking Lent as an opportunity to reflect on our own sin and brokenness and seek reconciliation with a family member, a friend, or a foe.
- And almsgiving or charitable giving, taking up a new or renewed practice of generosity to others.

The idea is that as you go along the 40-Day journey you're aligning yourself a little more intentionally, more closely with God's presence and purposes and all along you are being whisked from your old life and old way of being toward the new life of Easter.

The spiritual life is a journey, a movement, it's growth towards a goal. Paul likened it to a race as did the writer of the Book of Hebrews when he or she said "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us!"

Or you might say, given this day, let us shed the tackles and run for that endzone laid before us, let us block what hinders our progress down the field of life, let us USHER in the good and be Swift to avoid the bad, remembering that God alone is our Chief, amen? Amen!