

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 11, 2018
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2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

The 2018 Winter Olympics have begun! (You may have noticed.)

They're quite the spectacle. Right from the very opening credits for the television coverage we've come to expect. The booms of the timpani drums. The clear, clean high notes of the trumpets. And then, of course, there's the grandeur of snow-capped mountain peaks.

Apart from setting the stage and the scenery, the Olympics are a spectacle in just about every other way, as well – from the opening ceremonies and through the competition that follows. And our attention is inevitably drawn to the spectacular athletes and the great successes.

I found out this past week that my dentist's eldest son, Ben Ferguson, is a member of the U.S. Olympic team, competing in the men's halfpipe snowboarding event. So now that I know this, I'll particularly be watching for him and cheering him on as he "goes for the gold"!

It's only natural and inevitable, I suppose, that our eyes are drawn to the spectacle and to the spectacular. It's only human for any of us.

We see that in this morning's gospel. Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter and James and John. And there, he is "transfigured before them." And even if we don't know exactly what to make of the words, it's clear that Mark is trying to let us know that it was something spectacular.

Mark says that the disciples were terrified, that Peter didn't know what to say.

Not that it stopped him from trying ...

So Peter says that it's good for them to have been there, and he offers to make three dwellings – one for Jesus, and one each for Moses and Elijah. It's a bit like the medal ceremonies at the Olympics. He wants to celebrate the medals. He wants to hang on to this special moment!

And who could blame him?

But there's a word of caution for us to heed this morning. We hear it at the end of the gospel this morning.

And we hear it even before we start.

You may have noticed that when I read the gospel out loud, I began, “Six days later ...” because that’s actually how the verse begins – and that’s what’s written in the Gospel Book. But the website we use to “cut and paste” the readings left off those first three words because they aren’t mentioned in what follows ... and somebody decided they would only be confusing. (Anyhow, our bulletins got printed without those three words ... and I didn’t notice the difference in time to add them back in.) But we need those three words at the start this morning because what happened “six days *earlier*” is something we really need to remember if we’re to make sense of what happens here.

Six days earlier, you see, Jesus and his disciples were talking when Jesus asked them a question: “Who do you say that I am?” It was Peter who blurted out the answer: “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29). And Jesus told him not to tell anybody else. And then he went on to tell all of them that the road ahead would be hard and painful and that it would end in his death.

And Peter rebuked Jesus for that terrible notion. He wasn’t interested in hearing about suffering and rejection and death; that’s not what he meant when he said Jesus was the Messiah. He’s already propped Jesus up on the proverbial podium, adorned with gold medals ... and all the success and fame and glory that goes with it.

To which Jesus responds, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” And he tells Peter, and all the others, not to be too sure they know what kind of Messiah Jesus should be before they see him as he is.

And it’s not just Peter or the disciples on that one occasion. It’s actually a recurring motif. All through this season of Epiphany, we’ve been hearing about a series of epiphanies, each of them showing us something about who Jesus really is. But I’m struck by the fact that they all ended with some kind of instruction or admonition not to make too much of those first impressions.

Going back to the first Epiphany, the Magi were told to go home by another way, and so they never had a chance to tell Herod what they discovered. On the first Sunday after, we heard Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism ... and at least the way Mark tells it, the voice that spoke on that occasion spoke only to Jesus; nobody else heard anything. Jesus went on to call the first of his disciples to follow him – not to beat the drum or become his P.R. representatives, not at the start anyhow, just to follow him. We heard of the time he cast out an unclean spirit, but when the spirit, shouted, “I know who you are ...,” Jesus told the spirit to “Be silent ...!” And finally, last Sunday, Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law – taking her by the hand and lifting her up ... not to tell anyone what he had done for her, just to get her back up on her feet again.

And so, too, this morning. Jesus is transfigured before these three disciples, and they clearly want to make a big deal of it. And that is, as I’ve already allowed, completely understandable.

But a cloud overshadows them and a voice speaks to them, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” It’s the only time in the whole of Mark’s gospel that a voice from heaven speaks to the disciples and tells them what to do: “listen to him!”

And the next thing Jesus tells them is “to tell no one about what they had seen ...” Not yet.

And the reason is that they still hadn’t seen him the way he thinks they need to see him.

They so desperately want to see Jesus on the proverbial medal stand, winning the “gold medal,” they can hardly see him as comes down the mountain with them, down to join the other disciples, down to where we are, down to where the challenges of life are, down to the problems and discomforts and discouragements that are part and parcel of life in this world “down below.” I think that’s why Jesus tells Peter and James and John to tell no one what they had seen – not until after he’s risen from the dead, he says, which means, of course, not until after his death, as well.

Jesus went up a mountain with Peter and James and John. And there, he was “transfigured before them.” And then they all came back down the mountain, and Jesus was their companion down below, as well.

That’s more than just a recap of a single day in one of the gospels; it’s a recap of the good news of the Gospel every day since. In Christ, God is our companion through all the highs and lows – and everywhere in between, that God is with us on our best days and on our worst days, too.

St. Paul, in our second reading this morning, talks about people who don’t see as they ought: “... the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers,” he says. It’s not exactly his point, but I think he’s at least hinting at the same idea. The proverbial “gods of this world” – wealth and power and wisdom and fame and glitz and gold – imagine that they deserve more of our attention than they really do. And in the process, they blind believers and unbelievers alike to the more pedestrian concerns and more ordinary people we meet every day. To put it another way, we too-easily miss seeing what we most need to see if we only pay attention to the shiny objects that catch our eye and distract us.

I’m not sure when the men’s halfpipe is scheduled for these Winter Olympic Games. When they are, I hope to see them. And I’ll still root for Ben Ferguson to win gold.

But there’s more to see. Much more. If all we see and celebrate are the gold medalists, we’ll fail to see the hearts and valor of all the athletes. If we only celebrate the competition and stand and cheer for our side, we’ll miss out on what is, to my mind, the true greatness of the Olympics – that celebration of the common bonds of our humanity.