

Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 11, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: 1 Kings 19:9–18; Psalm 27:5–11; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Mark 9:1–9**

Mark, Matthew, and Luke all conclude their accounts of Jesus' first words to his disciples about him being rejected, put to death, and rising with these words, "There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the [dominion] of God has come with power."¹ Six days later—in Mark and Matthew, and "about eight days in Luke—Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a mountain where they will see that the dead live. This is a recurring theme of the gospels: the dead live.

The twelve disciples will be with Jesus in the temple when he reminds the Sadducees and the scribes of what God told Moses, " 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' . . . not God of the dead, but of the living."²

Jesuit scholars John Donahue and the late Daniel Harrington in their commentary on Mark remind us of "the persistent presence of the mystery of the

¹ *My translation* Mark 9:1; *See also* Matthew 28:16; Luke 9:27.

² Mark 12:26–27.

cross”³— I like their phrase “persistent presence” very much. But there is also in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and in John, to use Donahue and Harrington’s phrase, a “persistent presence” of resurrection. It’s there in Mark and Matthew three times when Jesus speaks of his death.⁴ It’s there twice in Luke when he speaks of his passion.⁵ But Luke doesn’t shortchange the connection between death and resurrection—nor does John.

In John, Jesus is the resurrection and the life.⁶ His words to his friend who has been dead for four days and whose body is beginning to decay in the tomb, echo through the ages, “Lazarus, come out.” Then Jesus said to those standing near, “Unbind him, and let him go.”⁷

In Luke, Jesus speaks of an unnamed rich man and a poor man, a different Lazarus.⁸ In the parable, the rich man while in the place of torment begs Abraham—

³ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 275.

⁴ Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34; Matthew 16:21, 17:22–23; 20:19.

⁵ Luke 9:22, 18:33.

⁶ John 11:25.

⁷ John 11:43–44.

⁸ Luke 16:19–31.

also alive in the life to come—to send someone to his brothers so that they will not have to share his terrible fate. Abraham responds, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.”⁹

Father Donald Garfield, who served as rector here from 1965 until 1978—my predecessor Father Edgar Wells came in 1978—was a member of the “Drafting Committee for the Calendar, Eucharistic Lectionary, and Collects,” one of the many committees that prepared for the 1979 revision of the Prayer Book. The committee’s work was published in 1970 as *Prayer Book Studies 19: The Church Year*.¹⁰ In a footnote in that study, we learn that it was this committee that proposed using the three accounts of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, in addition to the traditional celebration of the feast on August 6.

⁹ Luke 16:31.

¹⁰ *Prayer Book Studies 19: The Church Year: The Calendar and the Proper of the Sundays and Other Holy Days throughout the Church Year* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1970), iv.

A very little history. The Transfiguration began to be celebrated in the Christian East in the late 300s¹¹ or early 400s,¹² but it did not begin to be celebrated in the West until the 900s.¹³ The late Adolf Adam in his book *The Liturgical Year* suggests that it spread rapidly in the West with the rising interest in the Crusades.¹⁴ It is worth noting that it didn't become universal in the pre-reformation church until the year 1457 to commemorate the defeat of the Turks at Belgrade.¹⁵ Since 1945, one always remembers that August 6 is the date on which Hiroshima was destroyed.

So Lent starts this Wednesday. It has gone through many iterations since the fourth century, when Christianity began to be legal in the Roman world and Christians began to have the freedom to sort things out—to fight on a scale that was not possible when Christians lived with the threat of persecution and death. As we begin to observe Lent, I suggest that the

¹¹ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 247.

¹² Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981), 180–81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Shepherd, *Ibid.*

best of our tradition encourages us always to keep together the words “death and resurrection,” not to think of one without the other.

In Mark, in spite of all Jesus said and did, he will die alone on the cross. Jesus himself will cry, “My God My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁶ The evangelist then says, “Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.” The late Raymond Brown in his book *The Death of the Messiah* wrote that the meaning of the Greek translated as “loud cry” is “a desperate cry for help.”¹⁷ In Mark, the word of resurrection is first greeted with fear and silence. I think we try humbly to greet death and resurrection with faith and hope.

Until the last few years of terrorism, crucifixion was something that belonged to the pre-modern past. But terrible forms of cruelty, of course, have emerged. It seems that Nazi Germany developed a painful form of hanging that went on for 3 hours or more—scholars

¹⁶ Mark 15:34, NRSV.

¹⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (Doubleday: New York, 1994), II: 1044.

now think that is the way in which the anti-Hitler Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed.¹⁸

In Mark, Jesus again died alone and in pain. But that's not the end of the story: Death, Transfiguration, Resurrection, and the life of the world to come. As we will pray on Good Friday. "Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord."¹⁹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁸ Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Brazos Press, 2004), 27–28.

¹⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 280.