

### He Did Not Know What To Say

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Transfiguration Sunday, February 9, 1997. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Life is filled with experiences that leave us groping for words. And when we try to speak we hear ourselves talking foolishness. For example, several weeks ago Kay raised her hand during *Joys and Concerns* and, instead of calling her Kay, I inexplicably called her Ann. I should have just kept quiet. But I made matters worse by trying to explain. There are times when it's best not to speak or try to explain, but simply to be quiet.

And there are times when we simply don't have words to express our fears and thoughts. Remember when you first heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated. I was with two other students bussing tables in the cafeteria at Wheaton College when I heard. We leave the tables with dirty dishes and glasses and crowd around the radio. Listen! The commentator somberly announces, "President Kennedy is dead." The national anthem plays. We look into each others frightened eyes and say nothing. We don't know what to say because we're afraid.

I have an acquaintance who learned when he got back from vacation that a long-time friend had suddenly died in his absence. His friend was only in his thirties. My acquaintance told his wife, "I've got to go over and visit Tom's wife, but not today. I'm too overcome with grief today. I'll wait until tomorrow." Tomorrow came and he said to his wife, "I need to go visit Tom's wife, but not today. She'll have so many people visiting her today. I'll wait a few days until things calm

down." A few days passed and he said to himself, "I really ought to visit her. But, it was he who was my friend. I didn't really know her that well." So again he postponed visiting the young widow. Another friend saw him one day and asked, "Tom's wife was asking about you. She was sure she'd hear from you." And my friends response? "I've been putting it off. I don't know what to say. I was afraid."

We're often caught speechless at the most significant experiences of our lives. Your daughter comes home from college waving an engagement ring and saying, "I'm engaged." You didn't even know she was dating anybody. You stumble around for words. You're speechless. Or the master of ceremonies announces, from a field of five semi-finalists, who will be the next Miss USA. And the winner is speechless. Or remember the scene in *Mr. Holland's Opus* when his wife announces that she's pregnant. Mr. Holland is initially speechless.

At the most significant experiences in our lives most of us do not know what to say. We attempt to speak but what comes out, if anything, sounds so foolish, so inappropriate.

The apostle Peter knew exactly that kind of feeling on the mountain of the transfiguration. Jesus had taken Peter, James and John with him to the top of a high mountain, the symbolic place of revelation. Tradition identifies it as Mt. Tabor. Jesus' garments begin to shine with a brilliant whiteness, the sign of God's presence, like the *Shekinah* glory in the Old Testament that lit the way for the Israelites in the wilderness sojourn. Jesus talks with two great Old Testament figures Moses

and Elijah, and then, suddenly, there's only Jesus, and the voice of God, which spoke at Jesus' baptism, again declaring him to be the "Son of God."

Mark tells us that, in the middle of this experience, Peter said to Jesus, "'Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified."

That's what happens when we come face to face with the living God. We don't know what to say. Today we have a tendency to make the Lord God into a pal, a mere friend that we can clown around with. And the Risen Christ is our friend, but not like any friend we've every had.<sup>Victorian</sup> Or sometimes we talk of the Lord Jesus Christ as though he were a cosmic bell-hop who is there to do our every bidding, rather than the transcendent Lord who will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Many years ago, the great Swiss Theologian, Karl Barth, visited the United States. The students at Princeton Seminary gathered around to listen to the great theologian. Into the expectant silence Barth launched a single question: What is the Church? Then he waited. After a long silence, a student raised his hand. "Fellowship," he said. "The Church is fellowship. Getting together with people. Showing warmth and love to one another." Barth exploded. "Fellowship?" he said. "You mean coffee and donuts? People chattering about anything and everything?" Then he stopped. "No!", he said, "The church is where men and women encounter the risen Christ." The church is here, primarily, to facilitate that encounter with the Risen

Christ, the One who died for us and who will come again to judge the living and the dead. We're here, not just to talk about God, but to meet God in Christ.

Karl Barth, like Jesus Christ, was sometimes given to exaggeration. Barth wasn't opposed to fellowship, to donuts and coffee and informal fellowship. He was, however, much more concerned that men and women be confronted with the Risen Christ and be drawn into the fellowship of sinner saints within the church. He wanted us to know that the purpose of the Bible isn't to bring us interesting ideas about God. And the stories in the Bible aren't meant to provide simple illustrations of how God works. Rather, in the Bible, God speaks to us. The living God encounters us. That's why we call the Bible the Word of God.

There's a time for us to speak. There are times when we must speak -- speak the Gospel loud and clear to the world outside like Billy Graham does -- speak out against racism and injustice like Dr. Martin Luther King did. Speak words of comfort like Mother Theresa. But there's also a time to keep silence. "The Lord is in his holy Temple", the prophet Habakkuk said, "Let all the earth keep silence before him." There's a time to stop our chatter and and keep quiet in the presence of God.

What if, each week, we climbed the stairs to the sanctuary as Peter, James and John climbed the mount of transfiguration? What if we entered this sanctuary hoping and expecting and praying to encounter the One who Peter, James and John encountered on Mount Tabor? And to hear the voice of God saying,

"This is my son, the Beloved; stop your chatter and listen to him!"

Let us pray: O God, in the transfiguration of your Son you confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the witness of Moses and Elijah; and in the voice from the cloud you foreshadowed our adoption as your children. Make us, with Christ, heirs of your glory, and bring us to enjoy its fullness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.