



# “Mardi Gras on the Mountain”

Texts: Mark 9:2-9 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I don't want you to be misled. On the liturgical calendar of the Presbyterian Church, this Sunday is not known as “Mardi Gras Sunday.” Frankly, there would be some members of the Presbyterian family a bit concerned that we were celebrating Mardi Gras at all, let alone on the day set apart on the liturgical calendar as a time to celebrate “The Transfiguration of the Lord.” I'm not saying that Presbyterians are a cold people, though I have been in some churches where the ushers wore ice skates.

The Transfiguration of the Lord is the last stop in the extended season of Epiphany – a season that began way back on the Sunday after Christmas. Running in parallel to that observance, in many communities in the United States, but most notably in New Orleans, is the season of Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras season can begin on Twelfth Night – Epiphany – and it lasts until Shrove Tuesday – the day before Ash Wednesday. These celebrations trace their ancestry back to medieval France and are celebrated with unique variations in the communities that still observe them.

Mardi Gras is, of course, a season of excess. Wild celebrations, fantastic floats and phenomenal formal balls from the various krewes, delicious foods, beads, and hangover remedies are all part of Mardi Gras. It is a time of celebration, merriment, and unbridled excitement.

And then, comes Lent. No celebrations, the floats are gone, delicious foods give way to fasting. The merriment is subdued. The celebrations are silenced. Excitement is replaced by repentance and introspection.

Ask most Presbyterians which season is more appropriate or acceptable and the general agreement would be “Lent.” We’re not really a party kind of people. We’re more subdued. As Garrison Keillor once said of the people of Lake Wobegon, “When we let our hair down, it’s not that big a deal. We are a rather short-haired people.” Most of what we Presbyterians call celebrations wouldn’t even be noticed by other people walking by. We don’t go in for excess and we are suspicious of those who do. As one of my friends from the south reminds me, “Most Presbyterians look like their shoes are too tight and they were weaned on persimmon juice.”

So, when we look at the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, it’s not surprising that we look at the three disciples a bit disdainfully. Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of the disciples – are with Jesus on the mountain and they see everything that takes place. They see Jesus transfigured – illuminated in the most profound way. They see the presence of Moses and Elijah. They have ring-side seats to the whole thing.

And their response? “Let’s not allow this to end. Let us build places for you to stay. Let’s just stay here, in the pure light of this moment, and let’s glory in it!”

For generations, Peter, James, and John, have been derided for their desire to stay on the mountain. More sermons have been preached about the silliness of the disciples wanting to start a housing project on the mountaintop. We look down on the three as just being stupid.

The real point of the story, or so we have been told, is that when they come down from the mountain, it’s time to move toward Jerusalem and the cross. The importance of the Transfiguration, some scholars and some traditions tell us, is that it is the turning point in Jesus’ ministry and he is heading toward the death for which – according to them – he entered this world. The Transfiguration is about Lent.

But, what if, instead of Lent, the story of the Transfiguration was about Mardi Gras? What if, instead of being a story about impending suffering and death, it was a story about revelation and clarity? What if we thought about Transfiguration as being less about sorrow and more about joy?

Take a look at the story from a different angle. Peter, James, and John are with Jesus on the mountaintop. Suddenly, the lights come on! They see Jesus for who he really is. They’ve had their doubts and questions. They’ve had their suspicions and reservations. They’ve also had their inklings and hunches. They’ve heard Jesus’ words. They move people. They’ve seen Jesus in action. He casts out evil. He brings wholeness where there was brokenness. He breaks unreasonable cultural and religious norms. He challenges hypocrisy and condemns insincerity.

And now, in this moment that we can only call Transfiguration, there is clarity. The veil is pulled back. There is an epiphany of the first order. They see Jesus for who he is. And, as if an imprimatur was needed, there appears Moses and Elijah, as if to say that this Jesus is to continue the work of these two champions of Israel.

What would you think at that moment? "Let's head down the mountain so Jesus can die?" Of course not! You and I and most reasonable people would want to stay right there on the mountain and have a little Mardi Gras. We would want to celebrate and whoop and holler! We wouldn't want the dirge-ish sounds we're known for. We would want a little Dixieland. We wouldn't want to fast. We would want some gumbo and po' boys and maybe some beignets and coffee from Café Dumont, or at least a good Polish Pączki from Donut Bank.

The story is told of Archimedes, working on a mathematical solution that would help him determine the amount of water that was displaced when a solid object was placed in the water. He worked for a long time, trying to come up with the equation that would serve as the answer. When he found it, according to legend, he shouted, "I've found it!" Now, old Archimedes was a Greek, so when he shouted, "I've found it!" he shouted "Eureka!" That's why we still say it when we make a discovery.

For Peter, James, and John, the Transfiguration was a "Eureka!" moment. They had found it - the answer they were looking for. They knew who Jesus was!

And what was their response? "Laissez le bon temps rouler!" That's Cajun for "let the good times roll." Let's have a little mardi gras on the mountain! Let's build some shelter and have a party!

Years after the Transfiguration, the Apostle Paul was writing his letters. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses epiphany language to talk about realizing who Jesus is. He writes, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Paul understood that when we see Jesus for who he really is, it is as though the curtain is being pulled back, the veil is lifted from our eyes, what was blurry is now clear - and we see what's really going on. We see who God is and who we were created to be. We see how life is best lived and how love can be constantly shared. In Jesus Christ, we see compassion, compassion, gentleness, understanding, and authentic humanity. In Jesus Christ, we see God's love made visible, tangible, and concrete.

And when we see that – when it becomes real to us – like old Archimedes, we shout, “Eureka!” And when we are in the midst of that revelation, like Peter, James, and John, we just want to say, “Lesse le bon temps roule!” “Let the good times roll.”

Let’s have a little Mardi Gras on the mountain. And let’s get ready for that Mardi Gras that is to come. “Laissez le bon temps rouler!” For now and evermore. Amen.



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