

Gag Orders

2nd Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 11, 2018

Some of you, maybe most, are aware that just before I began as one of your pastors here at BWCOB, I had a pretty rough year and a half. It all began with what turned out to be a bleeding polyp on one of my vocal cords. The polyp made it very difficult to speak, and required 3 six-week periods of complete voice rest over the course of a year, the last of which followed the surgery which successfully removed the polyp. As you can imagine, as both a pastor and seminary student during that time, a compromised and often absent speaking voice was quite debilitating. But the loss of my singing voice for nearly two years turned out to be the heaviest burden to bear. During those two years, “How Can I Keep from Singing” – which had long been a favorite hymn – became a personal lament. It is nearly impossible for me to hear it anymore without getting emotional.

Near the end of my struggles with my voice, many of you also know that I got entangled in a controversy that resulted in my being the subject of an actual “gag order.” Given that most of that time I was under doctor’s orders to completely rest my voice, I had little trouble playing my part. But it certainly took a toll on my heart. Being under gag orders wasn’t any fun for me. In truth, the wound still festers just beneath the surface of my consciousness, and I don’t know if it will ever heal.

All of this came back to me in force in worship planning for this Sunday. I had no idea until last week that the Sanctus Choir would be sharing “How Can I Keep From Singing?” as their anthem today. But part of my standard practice in choosing worship and sermon themes is to take the assigned Lectionary readings for the week and just see what stands out on first read. Things that tend to grab my attention are timely messages, aspects of the texts I haven’t ever noticed or given attention in previous readings, problematic or dissonant ideas, and common themes shared between the assigned texts. And I usually give initial priority to the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

So given my backstory that I just shared, it shouldn’t surprise you that when I sat down with the scriptures for this week, something stood out to me as a common theme between the readings in Mark and Kings that were just read. After reading first the Gospel, then 2nd Kings, the question that needed answering in my mind from both texts was, “What’s up with the gag orders?”

Did you hear them too? Jesus is coming down the mountain with the select group of disciples who were chosen to witness his Transfiguration. After this incredible experience upon the mountain top – where they caught a vision of Jesus in all his glory, witnessed the specter of the great Hebrew prophets Moses and Elijah chatting it up with their rabbi, and heard a heavenly voice identifying him as the beloved divine son to whom they should listen – after all of that, what is the very first instruction that Jesus gives to them? Don’t talk about it. At least not until after the resurrection.

Really? How is that fair to them? Can’t you imagine the scene when they rejoin the rest of the group? Maybe some of the other disciples were trying not to feel jealous that they weren’t chosen to go on this little field trip with Jesus. As soon as they get back, the first question they

get asked – “So – how was it? What happened up there on the mountain?” And what could they say in response? “Can’t talk about it...Rabbi’s orders.” Bet that went over really well.

Now for anyone who has studied the gospels, especially the gospel of Mark, this scene contains a classic example of what has become known as the “Messianic Secret.” This phrase refers to the critical theory put forward by German theologian William Wrede in 1901 to describe and explain the frequent gospel scenes where Jesus is portrayed as commanding his disciples to remain silent about his messianic identity and mission.¹ Basically, if you are paying attention to it, there is a pattern particularly in the gospel of Mark, where Jesus does or says spectacular things that might point to his true identity as more than a rabbi or healer, and then demands silence about it. Case in point – just a few verses before this scene in Mark’s gospel, Peter makes his famous declaration explicitly naming Jesus as the expected Messiah, to which Jesus responds by “sternly” ordering them “not to tell anyone about him.”²

For Wrede, and many of those who followed his theory, the Messianic secret was not historical fact, but rather a device introduced by Mark to explain why Jesus was not accepted as Messiah until after his death. As such, this theory could help to alleviate my problem with imagining how the gag order was received by the disciples after the transfiguration, or how it might have affected their relationships. But I have to admit, regardless of what I ultimately think of Wrede’s theory, it doesn’t feel right to use it to explain away my reaction to the text. There’s something there that catches me when Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone what they’ve seen, and biblical criticism doesn’t really have a satisfactory response for that.

And it doesn’t get any better when read in conjunction with the story of Elijah’s ascent to heaven in 2nd Kings. Here is a very persistent Elisha who knew that he was about to lose his mentor. Elijah keeps trying to shake him, but Elisha will have none of it – he is with him to the end. And twice on their final journey, a group of prophets pull Elisha aside and ask him whether he knows that this is the day the Lord is going to take his master away. Both times his answer is the same – Yes I know, now, be quiet.

Great, another gag order – this time for all those prophets who already seem to be in the know about what is going on with Elijah. If only I could understand what was going on with these calls to be silent, and why they speak to me so profoundly in these texts. It seems that there is more going on than first meets the eye (or ear). But it has long eluded me.

In my quest to make sense of all this, I came across an old sermon for Transfiguration Sunday by William Willimon. It convicted me deeply, and so I want to share a significant portion of it with you. In Willimon’s own words:

In today’s gospel, Jesus takes a few of his disciples up on a mountain. Today’s first lesson reminds us that mountains are, in the Bible, favorite locations to encounter, or to be encountered by, God. Sure enough, that’s what happens. A strange cloud overtakes them. They hear a voice, “*This is my Son, the Beloved*” and the disciples see Jesus transfigured before their very eyes.

It’s a strange, mystical vision we have for today.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messianic_Secret

² Mark 8:29-30, NRSV

And because you are modern...people, I've got a problem with this story. How can you believe it? What's the point? Is it relevant to your life?

Before we answer any of those questions, let's step back for just a moment and admit, because honesty is a great [necessity], that we are modern people who may be limited in our ability to think about such a story. That assertion may strike you as strange, for it is of the nature of modern people to be conditioned to think that we are perfectly capable of thinking about anything. We are modern, therefore we are not limited by tradition, or superstition, or ignorance or any of those bonds that limited our forebears. We are modern, therefore we stand up and look out upon the world with totally unlimited vistas.

I'm wondering, though...if we modern people are limited? I wonder, in our infatuation with facts, and data, and empirical proof, if our vision maybe has shrunk rather than expanded?

As a pastor, listening to you, listening to myself, I believe that there is more happening in you, more going on in me, than modernity has been able to grasp. People yearn for a thicker description of reality than has been offered to them through psychology, or sociology, or politics, or the other ways modernity uses to talk about us.

We long for more. In our better moments we know that there is more going on in the world, more going on in us, than modernity has been able to grasp.

[And] perhaps that's one of the reasons, just one, why you are here this Sunday. You have some inarticulate, nevertheless real desire for a wider rationality. You probably wouldn't say it that way, but you would say, "Yes, I want to know more. My life isn't some psychological problem to be solved, it's a mystery..." It's as if there really is someone, something out there, or in here, trying to get through to you. Maybe one of the most helpful things about church is that here is one place that we have the courage to explore that mystery, to venture forth into that too little discussed territory called mystery, called the divine, called God.³

I think in the end, it is that great mystery, that divine unknown, that has been bothering me in reading these texts. This realization came as a surprise to me, given the very specific fixation I developed on the fairly minor details of the gag orders present in these texts, not to mention the backstory of my life that seemed so relevant when I first approached these texts in this worship context. But my own integrity compels me to admit that perhaps my felt need to explain why these gag orders captured my attention was actually a distraction from the real message they have for me, and for us, this morning.

So where does that leave us? I don't know. But I am beginning to suspect that, as William suggested, my preoccupation with trying to "figure out" what is going on in these stories has actually shrunk my vision rather than expanded it. Quite simply, I have immersed myself in these texts over the past few weeks, and I have hit a dead end. I sense that there is still something more there to be had. But I don't know what it is.

And so I am going to take the advice of the text literally, and not talk any more about it right now. Instead, I would like to close with an invitation. Because I suspect that for all of us, there is more going on in our lives than we are able to speak about. Perhaps it is too personal to

³ William H. Willamon. "A Wider Rationality." *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 27, No. 1. (1999). p 28.

divulge. Perhaps the time is just not right. But regardless of the reason, there is surely more to each of us than meets the eye. But we are here, and so I think we can safely assume that we are all seeking that something more – that divine mystery that has called us here. So here is the invitation: embrace the mystery. For whether we are fresh off the mountaintop, or presently stuck in the valleys below, it is the mystery in which we live, and move, and have our being