

Mark 9:2-9

February 22, 2009

South Plains

Transfiguration

### Secret Agent Man

How many of us as children have pretended or day-dreamed about being a secret agent, someone sent to a foreign country either to spy for the United States or assigned the job of working behind enemy lines on a secret mission? Whether the hero is a fictional James Bond or a real life Valerie Plame, the notion of working under cover for some noble cause is an idea that captures our imagination. There's the danger of being discovered and possibly killed combined with the high ideals of service to a greater good. The key to a secret agent is having an identity that gives the agent access to the mission without revealing exactly who he or she really is.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is a kind of secret agent for God. He's known as a rabbi and a healer, an identity that gives him the opportunity to gather disciples and proclaim the kingdom of God, but he is not openly known as the Son of God or the Messiah. Sometimes this is called the messianic secret because Jesus himself seems to want to keep his true identity a secret. Chapters eight and nine of Mark's gospel pull back the curtain briefly when Peter confesses him to be the Messiah; and the transfiguration reveals him as the Son of God. We might expect that the disciples would come down from the high mountain and tell the world who

Jesus is. Very quickly, however, the curtain closes again, and Jesus orders them to tell no one what they had seen. Jesus is the secret agent, back at work where his mission is more important than his identity. What he does overshadows who he is, at least for the time being.

It's not unusual for one's identity to be somewhat at odds with one's work. If celebrities did not have private lives they would never accomplish anything more than being celebrated. The same is true for ordinary folks. Last week I met a craftsman who introduced himself as a Christian. I'm always glad to know that someone shares my faith. But, in this case, my primary interest was whether he had the skills we needed and whether his honesty would live up to the standards expected of a Christian. His work would confirm his identity.

Jesus knew that being introduced as "The Messiah" would interfere with his mission. Not only would he have to combat a lot of false expectations about the Messiah as a military savior of the nation, he would also be burdened with the distraction of defending himself from enemies, and from the craziness of people who would want to be known as "friends of the Messiah." Even his closest disciples argued about who would sit at his right hand. Therefore, Jesus does not exactly hide his relationship with his heavenly Father. But, he does not flaunt it or even make it openly known.

His mission is personal, but it is not about personal aggrandizement. Instead he offers a look into the heart of God. If we want to know who God is and what God wants from us, we look at Jesus. Look at the kind of person Jesus is to learn about God. Experience the love of Jesus in order to experience divine love. Listen to the teachings of Jesus to know what God expects. At the transfiguration when Jesus is clothed in dazzling white, the voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" For the time being, the message is more important than the messenger although that will change after the resurrection.

When I open up my computer screen, I have a bunch of icons, little figures or symbols that I click on to get to something else. Did you know that the word "icon" is an ancient religious word? An Christian icon is a figure or symbol we look at in order to get a vision of God. Jesus is that figure. He's much more than a symbol. He unites in himself both the transcendence of the holy with the practical responsibilities of the mundane. On the mount of transfiguration Peter, James and John experience a rare moment of divine transcendence as they see Jesus changed from his ordinary appearance to his heavenly appearance, from an earthly human being to a heavenly figure, from a man like any other first century Palestinian to the Son of God.

For the disciples who were just getting to know what an amazing person their leader is, this was an "Aha! Moment," one of those special insights into the truth

about Jesus. Jesus really is smarter than the average rabbi. Jesus is more than a magician who makes food appear out of no where to feed 5,000 people. His healings go far beyond what other physicians are able to do. Jesus has divine power. If we want to get to know God better, we need to look at Jesus.

The trouble with "Aha Moments" is knowing what to do with them. Beside the shining figure of Jesus, the disciples see Moses and Elijah. Peter wants to hang on to that moment. He says, "Let's make three dwellings (or booths), one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Peter thought it would please his Lord to be elevated to the company of mighty prophets of the Lord like Moses and Elijah. They represented the law and the prophets of Israel. What Peter could not have known, however, is that Jesus is greater than any prophet, greater even than the greatest prophets of Israel. Jesus ignores Peter.

It is the voice from heaven, a word directly from God that tries to set Peter straight. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" It's important to know the real identity of Jesus. It's just as important to listen to him, to follow him, to learn from him.

As we read the gospels, you and I know the messianic secret. We know exactly the identity of Jesus. Or, we think we know. We think that because we confess him to be the Christ, the Son of God, that means we know all we need to know about him. How wrong we are. Think of the trouble I would get into if I were to

assume that because Debby is my wife, that's all I need to know about her. Jesus Christ is so much more than we can comprehend because he is alive and vitally in touch with a changing world. More importantly, Jesus Christ is the incomprehensible, mysterious Son of God, very God of very God.

We know the messianic secret, the identity of God's agent who is God's own self. We worship him as Lord and Savior. We also need to listen to him. We need to learn from him. And, we learn by prayer and study of the scriptures and by following him into the world with all the responsibilities and troubles of each day.

So, we have two things going on in our relationship with God in Christ. We worship, as the disciples were learning to do on the mountain when they saw Jesus transfigured. And, we listen and learn, as they were learning to do when they followed him down the mountain and continued his ministry.

Our ministry, our life together in South Plains Presbyterian Church has the same dual focus. We worship and we follow Jesus, learning from him how godly people live. When we share our faith with others, when we engage in that difficult, essential activity called evangelism, we not only tell people who Jesus is, the Christ; we also teach and demonstrate the life he lived.

I suspect we are more like Peter than we like to admit. We want to honor Jesus with a dwelling or a church. And, it's appropriate and essential that we worship him as the Son of God, the Beloved, the Messiah or Christ of God. But, it's never enough just to acknowledge his identity in worship. We need to go back down the mountain and continue the daily routine of following him, listening to him, learning from him what kind of God we worship.

Jesus' mission on earth was not to shout from the rooftops, "I'm the Messiah. Come and worship me!" His mission was to announce the kingdom of God, a kingdom he inaugurated by his ministry of love and healing. God sent Jesus so that we could look at him and see the real nature of God's own self. So that we could listen to him and hear the word of God more clearly and more personally. So that we could imitate Jesus and become godly ourselves. It was only as people came to know the full truth about Jesus, his life and his death and his resurrection, that they had both sides of the story, his divinity and his humanity.

Our mission has the same dual focus. We worship God in Christ because Jesus is the window through which we see the love of God. But, the rest of the story is the life and teachings of Jesus: how God wants us to live and love each other. Simply announcing in worship that Jesus is the Son of God is only the first, critical step. The second step is demonstrating in our

lives, through our conversation, work, play and in all our relationships how God wants us to live.

This is the importance of the Christian life, the Christian mission. Our mission efforts demonstrate the credibility of Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God is arriving. When a neighbor sees a Christian serving someone in need, that neighbor catches a glimpse of the kingdom Jesus brings to our world. When people hear the church of Jesus Christ speaking up on behalf of the poor, and standing for just laws, they hear echoes of the gospel. And one day, in God's good time, we pray they will have that "Aha Moment" when Christian deeds and words connect with the person of Jesus.

Then the lights will come on. The figure of Jesus will shine like the sun. And, the love of God will come into focus. Then the crowd of the curious will become a congregation of worshipers who follow Jesus into a life of service.