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Texts in Context

What Does This Mean?
A Four-Part Exercise in Reading Mark 9:2-9 (Transfiguration)

DAVID J. LOSE

Each week preachers approach a particular biblical passage with a group of hearers in mind and a blank notepad (or computer screen) before them. The question they regularly ask is simple: "What does this mean?" They are not asking, of course, what the words themselves mean but rather what this passage might say that is worth preaching—and listening to! When I think of this task, I am reminded of the question Martin Luther employed to structure his *Small* and *Large Catechisms*. Taking discrete portions of the central elements of the Christian faith, Luther would ask of each, "*Was ist das?*"—"What is this?" or, more fully, "What does this mean? ...for us? ...today? ...now?!"

It wasn't too long ago that answering that question was a relatively straightforward, if not always simple, affair. The preacher's task consisted of two primary steps: (1) decipher what the text originally *meant* (exegesis) and then (2) discern what it might *mean* for us today (proclamation). The job at hand was one largely of recovery, as the preacher reached back to uncover the original intention of the author and applied that meaning to the current situation.

Of late, things have changed. The two-step hermeneutical waltz that guided the work of most preachers for the last century has, by and large, been displaced, if not discarded, by the advent of dozens of methods offering alternative routes to the meaning of a text. Although many preachers steeped in historical-critical traditions

Where shall preachers and teachers locate the meaning of the gospel story of the transfiguration for themselves and their hearers: behind the text, in it, around it, or in front of it? Each location will yield insight, and none can be ignored.

sense this shift in terrain, they are less confident of a route forward. At the very least, they sense that the exegetical task is no longer simply one of *recovery*, but is now more a matter of *discovery* and calls for as much imagination as it does academic rigor. Still, given the variety of interpretive options available, the assignment can be daunting.

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In the following paragraphs I hope to provide preachers some aid in their task by organizing many of the exegetical methods available around the four places, or locations, of meaning these interpretive approaches presume. To make this exercise concrete, I will focus on one discrete passage, Mark 9:2-9, the passage read on the Sunday of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Series B of *The Revised Common Lectionary* (March 2, 2003).

"BEHIND" THE TEXT

Classic historical-critical approaches locate meaning behind the biblical passage, usually in the intentions of the author or, reaching even further back, in the actual event or saying that prompted the witness. From this point of view, the text is something like a window that the careful exegete peers through to recreate the historical origins of the text and in this way gain greater insight into what the passage in question meant. Source, text, form, and redaction criticisms all fall into this camp, each focusing on some element in the process of composition that stands "behind" the text, stretching from an originating historical event to the written record of it.

Whatever reservations some scholars may currently have about the historical-critical method, it is difficult to ignore the usefulness of knowing something of the historical context of a passage. Historical study can make more vivid the social, economic, and cultural background in which a passage was first written and read and help us thereby to hear it more fully. Of all the methods that fall into this group, perhaps the most useful is redaction criticism, where the intent is less to discover some original event with which to compare the author's final version and more to open up the confessional thrust of the author, as much as we can detect it.

Hence, in the passage at hand it is probably less interesting to focus on whether the transfiguration is either a misplaced resurrection narrative, a dramatized historical account, or a symbolic interpretation of the disciples' experience of Jesus, and more useful to ask what Mark intended to confess through his account. Comparing his description to that of Matthew and Luke draws attention to his treatment of the disciples. Only Mark records (1) that Peter "did not know what to say, for they [the disciples] were terrified" and (2) that Peter, James, and John de-

scended from the mountain "questioning what this rising from the dead could mean."

In this scene, as is characteristic in Mark's account, the disciples fail utterly to understand Jesus' message. They simply do not or cannot comprehend that Jesus' glory will be most fully revealed in the vulnerability, suffering, and shame of the cross. Whether Mark offers his portrait to combat a christology of glory that competed for his community's attention, as is often assumed, is finally less important than the bare fact of Mark's concern to shape a narrative that leads from the high mountain of this epiphany to another mountain, just outside Jerusalem, where these same disciples will be encountered by a revelation of a wholly different nature. The gap between the disciples' current perceptions and expectations and Jesus' intentions and mission is striking.

For this reason, having identified some aspect of Mark's authorial intention worthy of attention, we move beyond the historical dimensions of Mark's account to focus on its narrative details and, in so doing, move to the second locus of meaning.

"In" the Text

If our first locus of meaning is concerned with the historical dimensions of the biblical witness, the second looks to the literary dimensions. The rationale for such a shift in attention stems from a desire to let the final literary work "speak" for itself, trusting that narrative elements such as plot, characterization, and dialogue will offer sufficient clues to arrive at the meaning of a passage independent of our ability (or lack there of!) to recover reliable historical information about the author and his intentions. From this point of view, the text is not a window but a work of art (whether portrait or play) that offers internal cues to how it should be viewed and understood, and meaning is located not "behind" the text but "in" it.

We therefore return to Mark's depiction of the transfiguration, cognizant that it stands at the exact midpoint of his gospel. Further, this episode also functions as something of a turning point in Jesus' career, a bridge between his ministry of healing in Galilee and his journey to Jerusalem. We will look to these verses, therefore, with some care, as they serve as a narrative fulcrum on which Mark's plot swings.

Further, it is important to note the continuity between Mark's characterization of the disciples in these verses and those immediately preceding them, where Mark records Peter's great confession of Jesus as Messiah, his rejection of Jesus' prediction of his passion and subsequent rebuke by Jesus, and Jesus' discourse on the cruciform pattern of authentic discipleship. Throughout, Mark portrays the stark clash of expectations between the disciples and Jesus regarding the nature of his messiahship.

Placing this scene in the larger narrative sweep of Mark's Gospel suggests that the disciples misunderstand not because they are buffoons—although one at times gets that sense in Mark—but because (1) they regard things from a human point of view and (2) the time of understanding has not yet arrived.

The disciples' failure to transcend their human expectations has already been portrayed in Jesus' rebuke of Peter a few verses earlier (8:33). Therefore, once Mark describes the glorified state of the transfigured Christ—which, strikingly, is probably the kind of Christ that would have most appealed to the disciples—the evangelist moves immediately to record the divine voice both identifying Jesus' relationship to God and commanding the disciples to "listen to him." In Mark's treatment, the revelation of Jesus' glory confirms the truth of his prediction of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Ultimately, the disciples will see and comprehend Jesus' divine glory only by following him to the cross.

But that time has not yet arrived; hence, their immediate confusion. In Mark's theological chronology, Jesus' true nature will be perceived only after Golgotha. Significantly, apart from the declarations of unclean spirits, Jesus is identified as God's Son at only three points in Mark's gospel: at his baptism, here at the transfiguration, and by the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross. The disciples are awestruck and confused because, this side of the cross, it is impossible to perceive the depths to which God will go to redeem God's people. In the meantime, Jesus refuses to be defined by their expectations and therefore rebukes their disbelief in the previous chapter and commands them to silence here.

For this reason, though we may describe the mountain-top experience of the transfiguration as an "epiphany," we must recognize that it is at best an ambivalent one—perhaps even disturbing—as it raises more questions for the disciples than it answers and points, as all things Marcan are wont to do, toward the cross as the place of God's most complete self-disclosure in Christ.

"Around" the Text

To focus on what is "around" the biblical passage is to attend to the ecclesial dimensions of the text. This may include the season in the church year in which we encounter a passage; the hymns, sacraments, and other readings that surround it during worship; and the church's treatment of that passage from its canonical placement to its history of interpretation. In all these ways we recognize that the Bible is the church's book, and the church's reading and use of that book profoundly shapes our reading of it today.

Ironically, this dimension—apart, perhaps, from canonical criticism—is one that has received the least attention in recent hermeneutical literature. Yet, week in and week out, pastors preach from texts that a have a distinct history in the church's use. Perhaps the most influential of these are (1) the season of the church year in which the readings fall and (2) the complex of readings appointed by the lectionary on any given Sunday to emphasize a theme of that liturgical season. Because Mark 9:2-9 is read as a part of a festival celebration, we will focus especially on the character of the Sunday of the Transfiguration.

Interestingly, the festival of our Lord's Transfiguration was originally not a Sunday feast at all but was assigned to August 6. The Reformers moved it to the

Sixth (and eventually last) Sunday of Epiphany in part so that it would be read every year. This shift was easy to justify, as the principal reading of the August 6 celebration (Matthew's account of the transfiguration) was already the gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Lent in the Roman one-year lectionary. In its new setting, Transfiguration Sunday was therefore meant to serve as the bridge between Epiphany and Lent, and preachers could look in either direction for homiletical inspiration.

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As the culmination to Epiphany, the Transfiguration recounts the public declaration of Jesus' relationship as God's beloved Son, thereby bringing full circle the pattern of illumination and revelation commenced at the Baptism of our Lord. In this light, it is not hard to imagine that Jesus' descent from this "mountain top experience" propels him toward Jerusalem even as the public affirmation of his divine relationship with God the Father enables him to face the future that awaits him there.

Looking forward, the Transfiguration heralds the arrival of Lent in Jesus' descent down the mountain, speaking as he descends of his impending death and heading resolutely toward Jerusalem and the cross shortly thereafter. So if the transfiguration signals the high point of the revelation of Jesus' divinity, it also ushers us toward the culmination of his humanity where he will experience all of human life, even to the point of death.

Yet there is a third dimension to the day as well, as the transfiguration is also —and simultaneously—a foreshadowing of the resurrection. Mark's focus not on Jesus' face (as in Matthew and Luke), but rather on his whiter-than-white raiment anticipates the young man who heralds Jesus' resurrection at the empty tomb (16:5). Similarly, the awestruck reaction of the disciples mirrors that of the women at the empty tomb (16:8). In essence, the disciples witness a preview of Jesus' resurrected state, and though they do not yet understand the path Jesus will tread to get there, this glimpse of glory confirms the necessity of their following him down that road.

Given these homiletical and interpretive options, there is a certain ambivalence about the day. But it is, I contend, an important ambivalence, as finally the characteristics of these three seasons—the incarnation and its unfolding significance witnessed to in Epiphany, the passion anticipated in Lent, and the resurrection proclaimed in Easter—cannot be separated. You cannot have one without the others. While the preacher may of necessity emphasize one dimension over another in a particular sermon, all three are nevertheless bound together as complementary scenes in the larger drama of God's quest to redeem God's people.

Which direction the preacher will lean—back toward Epiphany, ahead to Lent, or further forward yet to Easter—may be influenced by the themes she has arrived at through her historical and literary study. It will also be determined in part by the preacher's context, the final locus of meaning we will consider.

"In Front of" the Text

The last of the four locations we will take up is by far the most controversial, as paying too much attention to one's context—what is "in front of" the text—as a locus of meaning appears to risk the integrity of the biblical witness as independent "source and norm." Nevertheless, there is simply no avoiding the fact that we come to the Scriptures with distinct questions and expectations, shaped by our particular socio-cultural locations and experiences, and that these issues color our reading (influencing even what we read and whether we read in the first place). In this sense, the text functions something like a mirror, both reflecting and taking meaningful shape in relation to our hopes and fears, dreams, concerns, and commitments. Hence, the dimension of the text we attend to most closely from this point of view is the concrete context in which it will be heard.

This context may be quite particular, emerging out of the immediate challenges and questions of the individual preacher, or it may encompass the situation and life of the congregation, the local community in which the congregation is planted, or national and international issues and events.

"the very passage that offers me comfort in the midst of anxiety also calls that anxiety sharply into question"

As I write, the United States is preparing for war. As you read, war may have come. This is the context that shapes my reading of this passage from Mark, and for this reason I am inclined to look to this passage for a source of comfort and encouragement in the face of war. Hence, I note that the historical, narrative, and ecclesial dimensions of the text all emphasize the centrality of the cross of Christ and thereby suggest that the God who became incarnate at Bethlehem has descended to earth for no other reason than to embrace fully our humanity, taking on our lot and our lives that we may live with hope.

Further, at our baptism this God declares publicly that we, also, are God's children, wondrous and beloved in God's eyes. In light of this identity we can move forward to face the uncertainties of the present and future that await us, singing boldly with Luther, "Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threat'ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand, they cannot overpow'r us." Why? Because, as Luther concludes, "The Kingdom's ours forever."[1] Standing be-

[1]Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (*LBW*) (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) hymn 229.

tween Galilee and Jerusalem, at the crossroads of his ministry and mission, Jesus reaches out to us amid our fear, desperation, and need, and that is a profound source of comfort.

At the same time, however, through my work with this passage I have come to suspect that the very passage that offers me comfort in the midst of anxiety also calls that anxiety sharply into question. After all, are we any less secure today than we were on September 10, 2001? No. Then what has changed? Only that we now know our vulnerability with a poignant, even painful, intimacy previously unimagined. This should not be news to disciples of Christ. Surely those who follow the one who opened himself fully to the poverty, pain, and paucity of this life cannot believe they will be exempt from a measure of the same.

We too stand—always—between, if not Galilee and Jerusalem, then Christ's first coming heralded at Advent (the start of the Christmas cycle) and the second coming promised at the Ascension (the conclusion of the Easter cycle). We stand, that is, betwixt and between the already and the not yet, the old Jerusalem of our petty and profound fights and the new Jerusalem of a peace born of justice and equity—a peace born, that is, of God. In short, we stand at the transfiguration, looking from the vantage point of this mountain both backward and forward, and more likely than not with a measure of ambivalence about what will come next akin to that of Jesus' first disciples.

That can be a difficult place to stand because it is a place of both vulnerability and dependency, as we await the coming of Christ to right all wrongs, still all wars, and wipe the tear from every eye, bolstered with nothing but the promise that Christ *will* come to uphold us. In the meantime, we wait and watch and wonder, but not without hope. For the one we wait for chose not the path of easy glory but trod the road to Jerusalem and the cross, all for us.

For this reason, I sense some measure of rebuke in the text, not dissimilar, I imagine, to what Peter experienced, as I (and our whole nation) seek a measure of earthly security that Christ nowhere promises his disciples. At the same time, however, I am also encouraged by the promise that the road Jesus traverses from security to risk, he takes for us. This is given poignant expression in the Epiphany hymn "Oh Love, How Deep,"[2] which rehearses all highlights of Jesus ministry and mission confessing that they were all undertaken "for us," in this way echoing the central affirmation of the Creed that "for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven."

What I—and perhaps we—discover then is, if not comfort, at least courage, the ability to persevere, to hang tough, in the meantime, confident that our waiting will not be in vain and therefore ready to cry, with the faithful of all the ages, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

[2]Attributed to Thomas à Kempis, *LBW*, hymn 88.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? — FOUR PLACES TO LOOK

We can look for the "meaning" of the text in at least four different places in the history of the Bible's composition and use. Biblical interpretation then becomes a matter of paying attention to the movement from...

Acts and events that occasioned testimony...	That was incorporated into literary documents...	Arranged and used by the church...	And now heard by contemporary believers.
"Behind" the Text	"In" the Text	"Around" the Text	"In Front of" the Text
Paying attention to *historical* dimensions of the passage	Paying attention to *literary* dimensions of the passage	Paying attention to the *church's use* of the passage	Paying attention to the world, context, and circumstances of the current readers of the passage
Text as "Window"	Text as "Work of Art"	Text as "Church's Book"	Text as "Mirror"
Historical context, literary and rhetorical form, and editorial changes all help to elicit the "original intention" of the author.	Plot, characters, and dialogue all reveal the "narrative meaning" of these literary documents.	Place in canon, place in liturgy (other readings, sacraments, church season, type of service), and the text's history of interpretation all describe how the church has read this passage.	Word and community events, context of congregation, and the immediate circumstances and needs of hearers all help to identify how the passage might be heard today.

LOCAL WORDS

So, after all this, we must return to the beginning, asking of this passage what we will ask of all passages: What does this mean? The answer, finally, cannot be made in the abstract, as it emerges always and only in the to-and-fro, give-and-take event of particular persons reading distinct passages in light of specific contexts and concrete needs. Interpretation is always a local performance.

This is not, however, to privilege unduly the last location—the context of our worshiping community—over all the others. Rather, it is to acknowledge that this final location most often functions as the sieve through which to sift all our other study, and identify what theme, what words, what sermon will be most fitting at this time and place.

For this reason, while the goal of this essay has been to simplify the interpretive task by organizing different exegetical approaches around four distinct locations of meaning, it cannot make the preacher's task simple. The joy and burden of preaching is to be called to do the difficult work of wrestling with biblical passages

on behalf of a community of believers until you find a blessing to proclaim and share.

So, go the text, looking behind, in, around, and in front of it, and be prepared to work, work, work, for discovery is always hard work. But in the midst of your labor, be prepared also to be discovered by the one who shed glory and honor in order to embrace his own death, all that we might have life, and have it abundantly. ⊕

DAVID J. LOSE, assistant professor of homiletics, is associate editor of Word & World.