

"SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
February 9, 1997

"SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS"

INTRODUCTION

I came across an article recently that tells us something quite fascinating about sharks....those fierce leviathans of the deep. Sharks only grow as large as their surroundings permit. I did not know this. And strangely enough, the shark is one of the most popular fish for aquariums. The reason for this is that sharks adapt to their environment. If you catch a small shark and confine it, it will stay a size proportionate to the aquarium in which it lives. Sharks can be six inches long and fully mature, but turn them loose in the ocean and they grow to their normal size.

I've noticed the same phenomenon with regard to the followers of Christ. If we are challenged to live heroic lives for Christ, we have that capability. Left unchallenged, however, most of us stay pretty much where we are - with an immature understanding of the faith and a lukewarm commitment to Christ.

TODAY'S BIBLE LESSON

Our Bible lesson for today contains one of those growing, stretching experiences that came from time to time and touched the lives of the disciples. Come with me to the top of a mountain. Jesus is there and with Him are three of the most trusted disciples - Peter, James and John. As usual, Mark doesn't provide us with all the details of what happened on that mountain. One wonders: did they have a time of prayer? Did Jesus lead them in some kind of quiet meditation? We don't know. All we know is that suddenly the disciples saw Jesus "transfigured"!

What does that mean - "transfigured"? Again...we don't know exactly and about all we can say is that somehow the disciples saw Jesus "transformed" into the "glorified" Christ who one day will rule over all of life...and that's about as far as we can go. Right before their very eyes these three disciples saw Jesus elevated to a new plateau.

Those of you who follow baseball may remember the name of Brooks Robinson, the former third baseman for the Orioles. Brooks Robinson was such a stellar defensive player that he became the standard of excellence for all third basemen (except for Cleve Boyer and Craig Nettles). It was often said of Brooks Robinson that he played third base as if he had, "Come down from a higher league!"

It's a crude analogy, but the disciples that day saw Jesus as if He had come down from a higher league. Mark tells us that the clothes He was wearing became a "dazzling white"...whiter, says Mark, than any bleach on earth could get them. And then, Mark says, the disciples saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. Moses, of course, gave the children of Israel the Law and Elijah, on the other hand, was the greatest of the prophets. So, here were the highest representatives of the Law and the Prophets and the "transfigured" Jesus was standing there in their company. And the disciples heard a voice saying,

"This is My Son, the Beloved. Listen to Him!"

And the disciples were....they were terrified.

TERRIFIED

That's a crucial statement. The disciples were terrified. And I think we can appreciate their response to this most unusual situation. I think you and I would have been terrified, too.

We sometimes hear about people experiencing strange phenomena...extra-terrestrial visitations, out-of-body experiences and the like...but for the most part these things haven't happened to us and so naturally we're a little suspicious when they happen to other people.

So, put this down first then that the disciples were terrified and chances are that we would have been a bit suspicious of Peter and James and John in the reporting of this event to us as they came down from the mountain....except for the way in which it affected their lives. This experience, as well as many other experiences they had with Jesus, transformed them...radically!

You and I are 2000 years removed from that experience and perhaps we can make light of it, but for them it was so real that it transformed them and they literally gave their lives for Christ. Christ was transfigured right before their very eyes and they were terrified.

Why? Because they were dealing with something outside their experience. Here was Christ, if you will...."in all His glory". Here was someone in a different league, as it were. Here was someone whose life shone with a beauty that was so rare and with an integrity they did not have. Here was ONE whose dazzling white robe indicated His holiness, His purity, His uniqueness...and they were but ordinary mortals....fishermen taking time away from their nets. And they were afraid.

Then, too, being in the presence of Christ must have made them aware of their own imperfections and their own shortcomings, their own inadequacies.

While serving aboard a gunboat in Vietnam, David Roever, was holding a grenade some six inches from his face when a sniper's bullet ignited the explosive....six inches from his face and in his book, Welcome Home, Davey, he describes the first time he saw his face after the explosion.

"When I looked up in that mirror, I saw a monster...not a human being...my soul seemed to shrivel up and collapse in on itself....to be sucked into a black hole of despair. I was left with an indescribable and terrifying emptiness. I was alone in the way the souls in hell must feel alone."

Finally the day came when Roever returned to the States to meet with his young bride, Brenda. Just before Brenda arrived, Roever watched the wife of another burn victim tell her husband that she wanted a divorce. Then Brenda came in,

"Showing not the slightest tremor of horror or shock" he writes...."she bent over and down and kissed me on what was left of my face. Then she looked me in my good eye, smiled and said, 'Welcome home, Davey...I love you'. To understand what that meant to me you have to know that's what she called me when we were most intimate...she would whisper 'Davey' over and over in my ear...by using her term of endearment for me, she said, 'You are my husband. You will always be my husband....you are still my man!'"

To understand the grace of God poured out for us in Christ, we must first understand our inadequacy, our imperfection, our ugliness...as it were. But the

transfigured Christ in all His loveliness, in all His holiness and in all of His glory still loves us. There was no need, really...for the disciples to be terrified, but they did not know it. All they could see and experience in that moment was Christ's holiness and their own unworthiness and they were terrified.

TRANSFORMED

Then they were transformed and that's the second thing for us to take away from this Gospel lesson. They were transformed. Oh, perhaps not all at once....few are. Transformation rarely happens all at once. Don't let anyone mislead you. Few people are genuinely converted completely all in one night or in one hour. I would like to think that this experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was but one step on the road...one step on the disciples' pilgrimage to becoming Apostles of Jesus Christ! They would, indeed, share some other important experiences with Christ.

But at the time something real and important was happening deep down inside of them...below the surface of their lives. Perhaps they were becoming more like the Master. They were becoming more attached and more committed to Him and to one another. Their faith.....which was not even as large as a mustard seed...was growing. Oh, they would stumble and lose hold of it from time to time, but they would always come back to it (just as we do) and it would one day blossom into a mighty faith that would shake the Roman Empire. These men would move from being terrified to being terrific. Their faith would grow from being easily intimidated to being almost invincible. They were in the process of being transformed by the presence of the transfigured Christ.

And friend...whoever you are...the same thing can happen to us. Like the disciples we can also be terrified in Christ's presence because we, too, are imperfect, but we soon discover that in His presence we are not without value and we are not without hope. Because God "in Christ" loves us, change is possible. And this is the heart of today's Bible lesson. The proper response to the "transfigured" Christ is "transformation". To see the transfigured Christ is to be aware not only of our own inadequacies, but also our possibilities. For as He is....so shall we one day be!

Several years ago during a Lenten Season I went to see a drama somewhere in the city that portrayed the life of Jesus. Entitled, The Man Born To Be King, it reached its climax in the Crucifixion scene. The three Marys entered and approached the Roman guards. Mary, the mother of Jesus, spoke to the captain asking for permission to minister to the needs of her dying Son. But he pushed her away roughly. Then one of the other women came forward and made the same request, but she added some interesting words. She asked the captain to do this "for old times' sake...." and the captain refused her request also. And then with a sweeping motion of her hand, she loosed her golden hair so that it could cascade down her back. She asked the captain as he watched,

"Marcellus...have you ever seen hair like this?"
And then she thrust out a foot and asked, "And have feet ever danced for you like these feet?"

An incredulous expression came across the face of the captain and in amazement he said,

"Mary Magdalene...how you have changed!....."

Slowly....with dramatic emphasis, she turned so that her back was to the audience and she was facing Christ on the cross. Slowly she said, "Yes, yes, Marcellus, I have changed. He changed me!"

To see Christ as He really is is to experience personal transformation. It doesn't always happen in one night, one hour, one service....sometimes it takes a bit longer. But He waits and the time comes. C. S. Lewis put it quite pointedly when he wrote,

"He - Jesus - never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, 'Be perfect' He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the 'full treatment'. It is hard, but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder...in fact, it is impossible.

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird; it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary decent egg. We must be 'hatched'....or go bad."

Curious imagery, but he makes the point. In other words, before we experience Christ's transforming power, we're a bit like unhatched eggs. To experience the transfigured Christ is first of all to be terrified and then it is to be transformed.

AND THEN TURNED LOOSE

And finally it is to be "turned loose"...to be turned loose to transform this world for which Christ died. Christ came preaching the Kingdom of God...the reign of God in every heart. And it is to His followers that He has given the commission for the teaching and the preaching of His Kingdom. Brothers and sisters...that's you and me. We are to be transformed and then we are to be "transformers"...turned loose in this world. Sort of like the difference between the thermometer and the thermostat...one registers the climate and the other determines it.

You probably remember how the story of the Mount of Transfiguration ends. Peter wants to stay up here and build three booths - one for Christ, one for Moses and one for Elijah. He likes it up there. But it is not Christ's mission to stay up here on the mountain and be worshipped. His is a ministry of love to the people back down there in the valley of everyday living. That's our ministry, as well.

I once read that when American forces captured Okinawa in World War II that the typical island village was a filthy place. The natives...the inhabitants were ignorant and poverty-stricken. But there was a village called Shimmabuke which was different. Its streets and homes were spotlessly clean and its citizens were friendly and polite. Why was this village so different from the others? They say that about thirty years before, a missionary on his way to Japan had stopped at Shimmabuke and had won two men to Christ - Shosei Kina and his brother, Mojon, and gave them each a Bible. And through them that entire village became Christian and life there was transformed. And that is our ministry. When we have been transformed by the transfigured Christ, we catch a vision....a vision of what the world could be if we all lived under the Lordship of Jesus.

CLOSING

No longer would Peter and James and John be content to live in a tiny fishbowl. For them Christ was calling them to bigger and better things....that mustard seed of faith was beginning to grow. Soon it would be time for them to reach their full potential as His followers.

For some of us it is time to get out of the fishbowl as well. I wonder.... if we had been there that day with Peter, James and John...and Jesus...how we would have reacted. Would we have been terrified, too? I think so. Would we have been transformed? I think so. Would you and I have been turned loose to transform others? Again, I think so....to transform this world for whom Christ died? Yes...indeed. So, friend, depart from here with the faith that the transfigured Christ is here and present...as spirit....to bless, to heal, to guide, to instruct...to lead us forth. Do not be terrified, but be transformed....be a transformer....depart and go out into the world and make a difference.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence. The deepest things within us are being stirred up in this time of worship....below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is at work, striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love. Minister to our personal needs. Walk tenderly through this community of faith now and be the help and the comfort, the inspiration and the sustenance of our souls. In the spirit of the "transfigured" Christ who can still "transform" people....even today. In His name and spirit we pray. Amen.