

## **Sunday February 7, 2016**

### **Mark 8:27-9:8**

A number of years back the Student Christian Movement of Canada had a talented and clever artist as one of their National Directors, and she designed a poster called the ABC's of Jesus. You can't see it well from this picture that I took, but hopefully you get the idea. It goes through the whole alphabet ...

A is for Activist ... the caption says "Jesus stirred up trouble in the streets ..." B is for Black; "Jesus was from Palestine, so the odds of him looking like the blue-eyed, brown-haired guy on the wall of your Sunday School class are pretty slim." C of course ... is for Carpenter. "Jesus worked most of his life in an average Joe job."

D ... Displaced. "Jesus was a refugee. This is Jesus and his family running away to Egypt because Herod was killing all the babies."

I can't read them all, but I can tell you that I have used it many times as a bible study, especially with youth and young adults. Some folks might find a couple of them to be slightly irreverent, even off colour. Part of the exercise is to ask which one particularly speaks to people. Many of the youth like Q ... for queer positive,

with the caption "Jesus liked to hang out with the marginalized and oppressed", with a bubble near Jesus saying, "Hi, I'm Jesus, wanna go for coffee?"

My favourite is the one for T ... which is for Transfigured, or trippy ... the caption says "one time when Jesus was hanging out with his friends he went all glowy ... it was really trippy."

It's a great party trick, no? But then, Jesus didn't want to be known for his miracles and healings. That's one theory to try to explain what is known in the book of Mark as "the Messianic Secret". We hear it twice in today's reading ... Jesus ordering his disciples to tell no one what they have seen.

Erin Wathin, in an online article, explains the concept of the Messianic Secret:

"Many of the miracle stories in the gospels have a common denominator: the hush factor. After performing a sign or a wonder, Jesus would often tell onlookers, or the recently healed leper/lame/blind man, that they were to **"Say nothing to anyone."** Biblical scholars have argued for millennia as to why that might be. Unable to fully explain it, they did what biblical scholars do and they came up with a big fancy name for this phenomenon so that people would stop

asking them hard questions. They call it the “Messianic secret.” As a theological concept, it is pretty hard to explain because IT’S A SECRET. ... Like many pastor/preacher/theologian types, I have long struggled to understand—much less articulate—the Messianic Secret. The gist is, Jesus knew that he was the Messiah, and that some stuff was going to go down. Exactly how much he knew remains a mystery. But for sure he knew that his disciples, and most people, were not equipped to properly handle the implications. So he would give them little glimpses of the amazingness of resurrection—*signs and wonders*—but then tell them to keep it on the DL. It just wasn’t time yet. No spoilers. Too much info would ruin the big finale.”<sup>1</sup>

So that, in a nutshell, is the Messianic Secret explained. But what I found truly brilliant and revelational about Wathin’s article is that she goes on to compare it to a modern day example – the death of the great British actor Alan Rickman a few weeks ago. Rickman is known for many roles that he has played over many years, but perhaps he is most known, at least to younger generations, as Professor Snape in the

Harry Potter movies. Spoiler alert ... Professor Snape starts out as a creepy horrible villain, and in the last book it is discovered that all along he has been a secret agent of sorts working for the beloved Professor Dumbledore.

An article appeared shortly after Rickman’s death in a British newspaper revealing that Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling had to reveal something of Snape’s character to Rickman so that he could nuance the role. Rickman knew he wasn’t aligned with Voldemort the whole time, but apparently he had to hide his knowledge even to the directors of the films.

Series producer David Heyman said "It was quite amusing, too, because there were times when a director would tell Alan what to do in a scene and he would say something like, 'No I can't do that - I know what is going to happen and you don't.'"

And Rickman said ... "Certainly, I did say I needed to talk to her before I could get a handle on how to play it, and we did have a phone conversation ... She certainly didn't tell me what the end of the story was going to be in any way at all, so I was having to buy the books along with everybody else to find out, 'And now what?'

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2016/01/still-always-what-alan-rickman-really-gave-us/>

"No, she gave me one little piece of information, which I always said I would never share with anybody and never have, and never will. It wasn't a plot point, or crucial in any tangible way, but it was crucial to me as a piece of information that made me travel down that road rather than that one or that one or that one."<sup>2</sup>

Erin Wathin goes on to say:

"Now that I've had this great epiphany, I want to re-read all the miracle stories and pick apart everything Jesus ever said about the readiness of the hearer, the witness, the believer... And I also want to go back and watch all the Harry Potters with this fresh perspective. What did Rickman know? What did he only infer? What little clues did he try to leave along the way, enabling him to not just 'play' Snape, but to actually become him—and the spirit of resurrection that his character embodied?

I imagine this is how the disciples felt on day 2. And probably on day 4. Wondering what they'd missed. Wondering what truth he'd withheld to protect them; and what he'd tried to show them that they just couldn't see.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/alan-rickman-dead-the-wonderful-story-about-how-he-hid-snape-s-story-arc-from-everyone-including-the-a6812031.html>

... we are not just mourning an actor. He was a keeper of the story. One who glimpsed ahead to the finale but held it silent and sacred. Giving just enough away to make that resurrection all the more meaningful, in the end. Just enough to make us wonder what else we missed, and go back and play it again. Here's to the keepers of the story. The makers of magic. The ones that hold the truth, until we are ready."<sup>3</sup>

Usually we hear the story of the Transfiguration on the Sunday before the first Sunday in Lent. And usually we just hear the story of the disciples and Jesus going up the mountain. They have this "mountain top experience" – where Jesus gets all glowy and Moses and Elijah show up, and the disciples hear God say "this is my son, the Beloved, listen to him." And Peter wants to build some little houses and stay forever on the mountain. There is much to think about in the story of the transfiguration ... about the significance of Elijah and Moses, about the desire for the disciples to stay on the mountain and bask in the glory of what they have experienced, the words of God which echo the words of Jesus' baptism ... this is my Beloved Son ... and of

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

course, Jesus' commandment to tell no one about what they have seen.

But today, the reading includes a couple of stories before the Transfiguration story. Stories that point to how we talk about Jesus. Stories that help us think about who Jesus is. This is called, in theological terms, Christology. And hopefully it won't surprise you to hear that over two thousand years, there is a wide range of thinking about Jesus, about who he was and how he has influenced, and continues to influence, Christians through the ages.

In the first story that we heard today, Jesus asks Peter – who do people say that I am? And then he asks Peter – but who do you say that I am? And then we have Jesus telling the disciples who he is ... then Peter argues the point which seems to make Jesus mad. And then in the story of the Transfiguration we hear God say who Jesus is.

Rachel Held Evans, American Christian columnist, author and blogger, in her youtube sermon on this passage, says that when Jesus tries to tell his disciples what is in store for him, what he will have to face at the hands of his enemies, his disciples just won't listen. Peter says "no, no, we won't let that happen." Jesus

responds with strong words "Get behind me Satan!", which Evans says is not exactly what you want to hear from your Rabbi, let alone your friend. But Jesus is trying to help his disciples see things differently - that to follow him means to understand that God works not through power or might, but through suffering and sacrifice. Through acts of healing and mercy, and by loving your enemies, even to the point of death. These are hard words for the disciples to understand.

Evans says that the reality is, none of us get to opt out of suffering, pain, even death. Sometimes this theology is used to justify and even perpetuate the suffering of others, or it encourages some to have what she calls an "over-developed martyr complex." Evans doesn't believe that Jesus is calling us all to be martyrs, but he is calling his disciples to choose. To choose between the way of the world, or the way of surrender and service. She says that ultimately, this passage is about identity, that of Christ's, and that of those who follow him. As much as we would like to have a Messiah that spares us from suffering, who hates all the same

people that we hate, we don't get to make a Messiah of our own making.<sup>4</sup>

Our stories today help us to reflect on the questions "who is Jesus" and "what is God asking of us?" Good questions for us both individually and collectively. As we turn yet another page in our history at St. John's, we may be tempted to suggest, like Peter, that we stay on the mountain, because it is good to be here. But as disciples of Christ we are continuously called into the unknown, the uncomfortable, the surprising, the place where we are met yet again by the presence of God.

The letter E on the ABCs poster is blank ... the caption reads "this one is a do it yourself ... fill in the blank and draw a picture." What do you draw when you hear Jesus ask you "Who do you say that I am?"

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6YM91\\_NZD8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6YM91_NZD8)