

This morning, the word that our lection brings to mind for me is filter. Filter.

We live in a world of filters. We want to see and be seen in flattering light.

Social Pilot, a social media blog, reports that choosing the right filter for the images you use in your Instagram Feed can improve the chances of someone viewing your post by more than 20%, and the chances of someone engaging or commenting on your post by 45%.

Let me stop there. Some of you might not use Instagram or other social media outlets. A filter, in this instance, is an enhancement to your image: a change in tone, or contrast, or color that helps your image to be more captivating. And it works! Why does this bowl of Roman Noodles that you nuked in the microwave, and paid less than \$.50 for look like you just ate dinner at a fancy Noodle House? How is it that the realtor can take a picture of your house at sunset, or use a wide angle lens of your dining room, and people on Zillow no longer notice the chipped paint on your front door, or the scuff marks on your floors and walls from children and pets?

Of course it's not just social media that incorporates filters. I've seen enough gas station churros, hot dogs, and burritos underneath a heat lamp in my time to feed an army, and yet I've never, not once been tempted to indulge in a single one of them. But when I pumped gas at the QT this weekend, the signage at the pump, and the video that entertained me made really convincing arguments, so much so that I seriously considered spending \$2 on a breakfast burrito and off-brand energy drink! (Almost).

I'll admit it, Jacqueline and I both binged and delighted in the new Netflix series *Bridgerton*. The bright, pastel-inspired filter in the show's intro song helped to solidify our fandom.

And right this very moment, as I am talking to you, I am using the blemish-removing feature on Zoom, and a web camera with a fancy ring light to help me appear warmer.

Filters, alternative presentations of light, help us both recognize and consider people and objects in new ways. Filters captivate and engage disinterested audiences.

I tell you all of this today, because I think when you hear today's story, one reaction is to simply dismiss it as an outlandish fairy tale. And another reaction, given our reliance on social media and filtering, might be to characterize the transfiguration as a glorified Instagram post.

I want to encourage you to resist both of these options. Instead, I want to invite you to consider how you might recount to others the glory and majesty of God, something none of us can fully articulate with our limited vocabulary. And oh by the way, can you make God's glory memorable, authentic, theologically sound, and tucked neatly into a larger narrative? That's a tall order, but one Mark's author performs in an admirable way.

Mark's gospel tells the story of disciples, some named, some unnamed, some not yet even born, who are seeking to understand who and what they are in the presence of.

Jesus, I think, was beginning to understand his calling, and his learning curve for articulating and revealing that calling to the disciples steepens throughout his journey. While the professional ministry of Jesus surely had high drama, like in today's story, this three-year journey wasn't all climax. Remember, one moment Jesus is doing the most basic of human things: walking, talking, sharing meals, being in community with his friends. And the next, Jesus is healing folks, or being filled with the Spirit to reframe ancient texts, or finding courage to challenge powerful authorities, or demonstrating a sense of empathy that is rarely seen. The disciples are only beginning to learn how God is empowering this ordinary friend of theirs to do extraordinary things. And they are just beginning to conceive that God might empower them in similar ways.

Yes, yes, yes! Climbing up a mountain and seeing your best friend turn tide white, all while engaging with Moses and Elijah is about as strange a story as one can conjure. But whether historical, or metaphorical, or somewhere in between, there are some really profound details in this story.

The mention of Elijah and Moses is pivotal. Jesus is not only on equal footing, but his prominence and purpose exceeds that of the two most impactful figures in Israel's story: the one who introduced the law, and the one imagined to be present at the end of times.

The presence of Elijah and Moses signals to Peter, James, and John that Jesus will be central to bringing about God's purpose for the world. They won't yet be able to articulate the significance of what they've seen, but they will know that the life of Jesus is significant beyond their expression.

The text also tells us that Jesus turns bright white, Tide white, whiter and purer than any human has ever been able to bleach a garment. I think that's a fancy, but more accessible way, to describe a light or sense that none of us have words to truly express. Peter doesn't have a Smart Phone handy, but his first instinct is to document this event with the construction of three dwellings. But before Peter can even act on his thought, the moment passes like a cloud or vapor. Jesus' coloring is more subdued, and he tells his friends, "Shhh, let's not share this to social media just yet."

I think it's very telling of who Jesus is, and indeed of the nature and character of the God Mark's gospel presents to us, that Jesus doesn't want to capture or document this moment. This event, this awakening, is a foretaste of what's to come, but it's only a short glimpse. God is revealed in the brief moments of life, and it's that small revelation that will bring the disciples energy, and hope, and renewal, in the journey to the cross and beyond.

I think Jesus is comfortable for his friends to see what's next for him, in order that they can begin to process what his life means for them. But I also think Jesus wanted them to know him, remember him, and engage with him in ordinary life. I think Jesus wants them to come down the mountain, because it's in the world, in the ordinary, in the work of those toiling to live in God's law, that God is revealed.

Now I know social media followers didn't exist in those days, but Rome's leaders weren't lacking for illustrations to embellish and enhance the public's perception of their power. Jesus is illustrated with a bright, beaming light. That seems a whole lot less ostentatious than Herod sitting on a gigantic throne in the hall of a

great, marble palace, or Caesar draped in purple, riding a war horse in a sea of bronze helmets. And Jesus, this simple, powerful, authentic figure declines the publicity. Can you imagine Caesar, Herod, or even the political leaders of today discouraging such publicity?

In a world consumed with filters, and demonstrating power, Mark's gospel introduces us to a humble leader, called to do transformative things, with a desire to share that transformation in the most human experiences. God most poignant plans for the world will not be revealed in showy, glitzy Kings; they'll be revealed in quiet, gentle, thoughtful people like Jesus.

This may be a fantastic, terrific, miraculous story, and yet somehow, somehow, the story of the transfiguration illumines the humanity, decency, and friendship of Jesus. And Jesus, to me, is even more powerful when he's unfiltered.

Let me close with one last thought.

I think we're in an awful rush to document and proclaim our worth through filtered lenses. Don't get me wrong, I do want to see your prized red-orange tomato; I really do want to see your glamorous family photo, and your super-cute children; and yes, I agree, it is more pleasant to watch the baseball game in July on a field that's painted green. But please don't let the filter be the only part of the story, nor the only thing that give its subject value.

Give thanks for the miracle of the seed, the sweat of the gardener, the cool dirt on her hands, all of the time and thought that went into growing that tomato; Celebrate the accomplishment of herding the kids together for the family photo, and let that photo remind you of their wonderful humanity, including the parts that get messy and silly, too; Let a green, manicured field also illumine the people who labored to make it just right, and the pleasure that spectators, support staff, and ballplayer exude in the playing of a game.

And yes, be captivated by a transfiguration – it helps us frame the significance of Jesus. But friends, it's not the filter that makes Jesus special; here's a person who's not afraid to get his robe dirty; here's a person that doesn't want to monetize your likes; here's a person whose most human elements – love,

Unfiltered
Bob Stillerman
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Mark 9:2-9



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

vulnerability, empathy – reveal God’s most endearing qualities. And here’s a person who’s very humanity allows us to love and embrace our humanity, and that of our neighbors.

In this filtered world, may we strive to see the value and beauty of an unfiltered people, made wholly and wonderfully in God’s image, and may we work for the unfiltered creation, Christ calls us to bid near.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.