

Filming the Transfiguration

Mark 9:2-9 | 2/11/2018

Paparazzi Peter. He's peering at Moses, Elijah and Jesus. This is a Kodak moment if ever there was one. But there's a problem. No camera. No film. No nothing.

We can sympathize with Peter's predicament. Let's be frank: Peter would've done us all a big favor if he had been better prepared. We could visit today the shrine he built to immortalize the moment if only he had been ready.

Imagine your grasp of history without Abraham Zapruder's 26 seconds of film of the assassination of John Kennedy, shot with an 8-millimeter camera on November 22, 1963. Or without the grainy footage of Neil Armstrong taking "one small step for man" replete with scratchy audio. Or without your LP of The Beatles' White Album.

It's a good thing that The White Album is now available on redigitized and remastered compact disks - along with every other LP in your collection - because it is increasingly difficult to locate a working stereo phonograph. And then ask anyone under 30 if they listen to CDs, or just to the music downloaded on their smart phones. CD players - next to go.

The Zapruder film, the Apollo 11 footage, the census data stored by the government risk disintegration or obsolescence in this new millennium. We can launch photographs of the kids through cyberspace, but we are losing the photographs of our own childhoods, not to mention our ancestors' childhoods, due to humidity, sunlight and general aging.

This hurts. It hurts because we have such a hunger to hang on to history. As Baby Boomers move into retirement communities, their storage closets - left unexplored for decades - have become fascinating excavation sites revealing both the history of their own families' precious moments and the history of home movie cameras: the 8-millimeter camera, the Super 8, the camcorder, etc.

These closet digs show that the first generation of parents wielding home movie cameras did a pretty decent job at documenting Christmas morning and birthday parties, graduations and weddings. And clearly today's parents are following in their footsteps by dutifully documenting all the usual life-changing moments of their children as well.

But, perhaps because space on a digital drive or in the Cloud today is so much less expensive than film, postmodern parents also capture those NOT-so-special moments: little Amber eating French fries, sitting in the wagon, banging on the piano, digging in the dirt, rolling in the leaves, playing with the telephone, wearing a hat, smelling a flower, holding a book, watching TV, singing a song, throwing a ball, kicking a ball, sitting on a ball, dropping a ball you get the picture.

If you're the Brigham family of New York, you've captured more than 1,800 minutes of video footage and over 3,000 still photographs of your daughter Courtney's life. Courtney is only 6 years old.

Unfortunately, Courtney may clean out her own closet years from now, only to discover countless photographs and videos with no working machine to play them. Technology is moving so quickly that, sooner than we expect, our painstaking documentation of life may be rendered a waste of time. A total waste. Time and cost equals history lost. And although data can be transferred to newer, faster programs, data migration causes new problems: Numbers do not always transfer from one system to another without significant errors.

We want to preserve every special moment, and yet ... armed with smart phones in one hand, hermetically sealed scrapbooks in the other arm, and countless files filled with images and personal data in our computers, aren't we in danger of missing something even more monumental? In our craving to capture it missing the God-given moment itself?

Peter, of course, had no smart phone to capture the extraordinary moment he witnessed along with James and John. It was literally a mountaintop experience, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Peter, understandably, was absolutely awestruck. An extraordinary event was unfolding, a moment in history so sacred that Peter, as Vice President in Charge of Doing Something, had to do something. So he proposed building a booth or kiosk or shrine - something - to preserve the moment. We're not told how he was going to do this, whether he had hammer and saw at the ready. But then Peter was never one to let details get in the way of a dream.

A cloud dimmed the moment, however, before Peter could throw anything together. Out of the cloud a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (v. 7). God didn't say: "Get a shot of the three of them over by that cedar tree." Didn't say, "Be sure to capture the moment!" Just, "Listen to him." Bummer.

Like tourists who see Paris through their viewfinders, Peter, who wanted to keep the moment from passing, was in danger of missing the moment. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John up to this mountain exactly six days after reminding them that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it" (8:35). It's not a bad idea to ask ourselves, "What are we really losing and what are we really keeping, in the big picture?" What will it profit us to preserve our life's history, if we forget the fundamental reason for remembering? Or worse yet, if we miss actually living our life.

I am reminded of the story told of a family on vacation at the Grand Canyon. They jumped out of their car, equipped with digital cameras, video cameras, smart phones, etc. They recorded the view from horizon to horizon, from river to rim. As the father hustled them all back into the car, the youngest son asked, "Can't we just stay and look at it for awhile?" "No," replied his mother, "we have to get going! We have three more stops we have to make today! You can look at the pictures when we get home!"

We ought to call a moratorium on this memory mania. Home movies may jog our memories of family birthday parties and graduations and weddings and so forth, but here's the danger. Focusing on the image, we forget about its meaning. We are losing the sense of the sacred in the mundane. More weddings are ruined by overzealous photographers than by spending more time enjoying the wedding banquet and mingling with the wedding guests.

So turn off the smart phone and go live. Skip the selfie and look at the Creation around you. Take out the ear buds and listen for the voice of God.

We go through life too busy trying to film the Transfiguration. We look but don't see; we hear but we don't listen. So what if we have acid-free scrapbooks filled with ticket stubs and report cards and pressed corsages, if we have forgotten what made those moments so sacred? So what if we have pictures and videos by the terabyte if we can't find the time to even look at them because we are too busy recording more of them? Which may also mean that we are so busy recording "special moments" that we fail to really experience them.

God's advice is to listen. Listen to the children, listen to life, listen for the sacred. Listen to Jesus.

Pastor Keith