

Mark 9:2-9

Epiphany 7, Feb. 20, 2022
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And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. ⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

It's always a wonderful feeling to stand on a high mountain, or even a tall hill, where you can swing your head around and see everything below. When I lived in Eau Claire, WI, there was just such a place on the north side of town. It's formally called Mount Simon, even though it really is just a hill, but informally it was referred to as the "Top of the World." When you stood on the peak of that hill, it really did feel like you were at the top of the world; you could see the entirety of the city of Eau Claire in a 360° turn. And that's a great feeling.

I'm sure that you've all had that experience before. Whether it be a hill, or a mountain, or a cliff, we've all been in such a place where you can stand in awe of the scenery from that high vantage point. And that's what Jesus does in our text for us today. He leads Peter and James and John up this high mountain to show them the view. But it's not the view of Palestine that He wants them to see. He doesn't take them up there so that they can take a 360° turn and see all of the Jordan River valley—He brings them to the precipice of that mountain so that they can get a good view of one thing in particular: His transfiguration.

It was a view that He wanted them to see, and it's a view that He wants us to see as well. And so today, I would invite you to gather together with Peter and James and John and take in, in the words of our theme:

The View from the Mount of Transfiguration (which) Will:

- I. Leave you speechless
- II. Give you perspective
- III. Show you where you are going

Now, anytime you're standing in such a place and surveying all the beauty of God's creation, it's natural to be speechless. There's really not much you can say. I remember feeling that way frequently when I was in Nepal several years back. Hiking through the foothills of the Himalayas, we had no shortage of spectacular views, and very often we were all left speechless.

Speechlessness was a lesson that the Apostle Peter needed to learn. He was one Apostle that was always ready to speak. Sometimes what he said was good, and sometimes what he said was unfortunate. And six days before the events of our text, Peter showed both sides of that. Jesus had asked his disciples, "**Who do men say that I am?**" (cf. Mark 8:27ff) And the disciples replied, "**[Some say] John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.**" And then Jesus asked them, "**But who do you say I am?**" And it was Peter that was quick on the draw: "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" He nailed it. Jesus was exceedingly pleased, announcing, "**Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.**" (Matthew 16:17 NIV)

Jesus then went on to describe for His disciples what it meant that He was the Christ, telling them something they should have already known had they been studying the Old Testament Scriptures. He explained to them how He would be betrayed and crucified and then rise on the third day. And our old friend Peter was quick on the draw with a response once more. He actually takes Jesus aside from the group and rebukes Him, ***“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*** (cf. Matthew 16:22ff) You see, Peter didn’t understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ just yet. He wants Him to stay there, not to die and depart, “Let’s just keep everything as it is.” And Jesus’ response this time was scathing: ***“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”***

Here we are six days later, and it appears that Peter still hasn’t learned his lesson. There they stood on the mountain of transfiguration, they see Jesus transformed before them, giving them this glorious view, and Peter just can’t keep his mouth shut! He says, ***“Rabbi, it is good that we are here.”*** And that part was good and true. But then he adds, ***“Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”*** And that was a really dumb thing to say. Apparently, Peter holds a few misconceptions still; there are a few things he needs to learn. First, he says, “Let’s just stay here. This is so great, let’s all just stay here.” He doesn’t understand that they couldn’t stay, for Jesus had come to suffer on the cross, not shine on the mountain. Second, he’s placing Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. He offers to set up three tents, literally three tabernacles one for each of them, shrines where they could each be worshipped. Clearly, Peter needed to learn how to be speechless, the same lesson that we could each learn as well.

Now, we ought to take note of the two individuals that were standing there on the mountain with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah, two men who had departed this world thousands of years before this day and already been brought to heaven. But there they are miraculously standing with Jesus, and they weren’t randomly selected. They stood there representing the Old Testament. Moses, the one who wrote the first five books of the Bible and gave God’s Law to the people, and then Elijah, one of the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets. They stood there speaking with Jesus, their attention indicating that Jesus was the focal point of all of Scripture.

And then God the Father speaks. First, a cloud fills the area, just as it had done whenever the glory of the Lord would fill the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and just as the cloud covered Mount Sinai when God spoke to Moses. This happened again and again throughout the Old Testament, whenever the holiness and the glory of God was present, the cloud would appear. And now the cloud descends on *Jesus*, and the Father announces, ***“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”*** It’s as if God is saying, “Peter, now *you* are done talking. LISTEN—to My Son instead.” Then everything disappears—the cloud, the voice, Moses and Elijah—they’re left with Jesus only, and that’s the point. In this magnificent event, Jesus is the focus. We ought to listen to Jesus.

Now, Peter would eventually get it. It would take some time, but he’d finally understand. He would later write in his second epistle, ***“For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed,*** (the Old Testament resolved in Jesus) ***to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”*** (2 Peter 1:17-19) Peter is saying, “We should be listening to Jesus.”

Peter would eventually learn to be speechless and to listen, and we need to learn to do the same. It’s easy to sit here with benefit of hindsight and look down our noses at Peter and his impetuous nature,

“Peter, how couldn’t you understand?!” And yet, we too have trouble listening to Jesus. We show this when we relegate Jesus to only Sunday mornings and fill the rest of the week with everything else that we think is more important, whether it be the box scores of our favorite teams, or current events, or politics. We also show this when we live not based on what *Jesus* says, but on what we like and how we feel.

It’s very easy for us to be exactly like Peter, quick to speak, slow to listen and slow to understand. And so, we need to go up that Mountain and stand there speechless and listening as Jesus describes His death and resurrection, and then we gain perspective. Perspective is a good thing to have, and you can certainly gain that by going up a high mountain. Then you can take a look at all the things that normally seem so large and imposing, and suddenly they look tiny. Like when you’re in an airplane and you look below and all the people and cars and houses get smaller and smaller and eventually disappear as you rise into the sky. Or if you’re at an art museum and you stand close to the painting and see all the individual colors and brushstrokes but backing away you can see the full picture.

Perspective is something the disciples needed to gain, and something that we need as well. Because Jesus was not going to stay on that mountain. Very soon, He was going to be plunged into the valley below, the valley of the shadow of death, and Peter and the other disciples wouldn’t understand. They’d see it—these same three disciples would be there in the garden as Jesus prayed on Maundy Thursday evening, in so much anguish that He began to sweat drops of blood—they’d see it, but they wouldn’t understand as they fell asleep, unable to be there for Jesus.

They’d see Him descend even deeper: betrayed by a trusted friend, arrested, put on trial in a kangaroo court, accused falsely by two different officials, whipped, beaten, bloodied, spat upon, mocked. Going further and further and further down into the valley of suffering and death and shame so deep, that none of the light from that mountain would pierce through its darkness. He’d descend all the way to the cross, where, crucified between two criminals, the world would laugh at Him, and His Father would forsake Him.

How confusing this all would seem, when you placed it in contrast with the Father’s words from just a few days before, ***“This is my Son, whom I love!”*** How can anyone make sense of this? With our focus zoomed in on the cross, viewing it from such close proximity, would anyone be able to understand why this was happening? No. So we need to back up, we need to gain some perspective. We need to stand on the Mount of Transfiguration, look down in that valley, and from there see what’s going on.

Because Jesus, shining here on the mountain shows who He really is: holy, perfect, the Son of God whom the Father truly does love. And when we see that and *then* see His suffering, we understand that He is *not* suffering because He was so terrible. He is not suffering because He was powerless to avoid it. The Father did not put Him there because He hated Him, but because He loved *you*. We need the perspective that the Mountain of Transfiguration offers, so that as we look down into the valley, we see the Son of God on the cross and ask, “What brought this upon you?” And from this vantage point, we know the answer. “It was I. I crucified Thee, O Lord.” The sins, which we so often downplay, the evil which we often think as not being all that significant—we see the weight of all we’ve done, when we look at this Son of God, the King of Glory, descending into the valley of the shadow of death and being forsaken by the Father who loved Him so much.

But as we rightly sorrow over the great price that our sinfulness demanded, when we view it from the Mountain of Transfiguration, we can also rejoice because the price has been paid. For Jesus the Christ went to the cross willingly. He did not remain on that mountain as Peter suggested but descended into the valley where He knew He would bear the awful load of sin for you and for me. He did it, and

we can see what it means for us with this wonderful perspective. And when we have this perspective, we can also now clearly see where we are going.

There's a part of J.R.R. Tolkien's novel, *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo Baggins and the dwarves are wandering through a certain forest called Mirkwood. And the forest is alive, and it's evil. It covers them with this deep eerie darkness, it leads them astray, causing twists and turns on the path until they are completely lost. And Bilbo decides to climb up a tree so that he can get a better view of where they are going. And when he bursts through the canopy, he finds a wonderful sight. The sun kissing his face, fresh air in his lungs, butterflies fluttering about him, and he can finally see where they are going. This is what the disciples needed, and this is what we need as well.

That high vantage point of Christ's glory would prepare the disciples for their Savior's descent into suffering. They would suffer great emotional pains that week too, but if they could just remember! If they could only remember! If they could just hang on to what they saw and especially to what they heard on the mountaintop, they would be able to handle the frustration and lows of Christ's suffering and death.

Our lives too can be so filled with twists and turns, feeling like we are being smothered by the deep evil darkness of Mirkwood. For the unbelieving world, the highs and lows of life, the twists and turns, are all seemingly random, causing frustration and despair. But as Christians, God allows highs and lows in our lives, each preparing us for the next. And so, before the season of Lent, during which we will rightly sorrow over our sins, God allows us to climb up the Mountain of Transfiguration to gain a proper perspective and to see where we are going. From here we can see all the way across the valley to the other mountain where Christ hangs on the cross. We can see Him in agony as He bears the guilt of all our sins, and we can see Him look up to heaven and cry out, "It is finished!"

We can watch as He's wrapped in a linen shroud and buried in a stranger's tomb. But as we keep watching these events play out, suddenly we can see as the earth quakes, and the stone is rolled away revealing an empty tomb. And here on the Mountain of Transfiguration, we can see what this all means. There's only two other places in Scripture where that word, "Transfiguration" is used, and one of them was in our epistle reading. **"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."** (2 Corinthians 3:18) We are enduring the same transfiguration, God says. From one degree to the next, which means even right now we are glorious. God is assuring us that we are glorious and holy before God, just as Jesus appeared on the mountain, because our sins have been forgiven. And we're being transformed daily, as the Spirit works in our hearts through the Word, and little by little we resemble our Savior more and more.

But of course, we still have our sinful flesh clinging to us, so we'll never quite achieve that perfect glory, not in this life anyways. But because of our Savior's glory, because of His death and resurrection, because He's taken all our sins away, there will come a day when we are standing before Him in His glory, we ourselves glorious the same. Then it will be true what the Apostle John writes, **"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."** (1 John 3:2)

Thanks be to God for leading us up the Mountain and for giving us this breathtaking view. In Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.