

## Transfiguration “Who is This Jesus?” Mark 9 7

May the word of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Feast of Transfiguration brings the season of Epiphany to a close, and in doing so serves as something of a mirror image of how we began this whole thing with the Baptism of Jesus. Once again, a voice from heaven declares Jesus to be the Son of God, in whom He is well-pleased. But how much water is under the bridge for us? At his baptism, we were introduced to him, now we have seen him heal the sick, raise the dead, gather the lost, cast out the demons, and love the unlovable ones.

Today, we see him garbed in light, as He is even now, a brilliant figure whose glory is hard for Peter and the rest to behold. The light is part of this message, an important part. The holiness of God, the purity and beauty of God are difficult for the fallen human mind to comprehend, even impossible. We avert our eyes as the disciples fall to the ground before it. But it is not impossible for human eyes to see. Moses and Elijah are also there, they have human eyes, same as we have. God would that we too behold the glory of his Son who reveals himself to this world. As John says, on the last day we will see him as He is, because we will be like him. (I John 3:1-3). Or as Job testified, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself.” (Job 19:25-27)

Is the revelation of Jesus in the Transfiguration simply the firm identification of the guy who would carry a cross up Golgatha’s slope? Do we see him like this now, simply so that we will know who it is who dies on Calvary on Good Friday?

In the Gospel according to Mark, the Transfiguration falls exactly in the middle of the book. Ancient authors often measured their scroll before they set pen to paper and deliberately shaped their documents to have climaxes right in the middle.

Has Mark put this in the middle because it is carrying a heavy load of meaning for this book? Is this the tent pole in the middle of the great tent of the Gospel that holds up the whole thing?

It would seem so. It would seem that the Transfiguration is the climax of the ministry of Christ that reveals him most clearly. It is saying what the whole ministry has been screaming to us about his identity. After this text in Mark's account of the Gospel, Jesus seems to be on a straight-line trip to Jerusalem, focused on what is to come.

This event is the antidote to what the devil and our fallen nature are trying to convince us. Some of us have a hard time believing in anything that science has not confirmed. Others cannot believe what is contrary to their cultural worldview. Still other people believe that stories about Jesus are no different than stories about Santa Claus or the tooth fairy. Among non-Christians, many will grant that Jesus was a great teacher or even a great prophet. And among many Christians Jesus is a prophet, a role model and the one who died for us so that we can live a righteous life and obey his commandments, following him and thus earning our way to heaven. Even Peter wanted to build booths honoring the three prophets, saying:

“Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

But God made clear the meaning of the Transfiguration by overshadowing them and speaking the words:

“This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

This a demonstration of Jesus' continuity with the OT. He has not come to abolish the Law but fulfill it (Matt 5:20-22). This a statement to first century Christians and to us in the 21st century that this Jesus is the fulfillment of the whole OT. Jesus is the one that Elijah and Moses were talking about; the One of whom the whole OT testifies.

A fact that prompts Paul to write:

“Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (I Corinthians 10:1-4)

This passage addresses a misbelief about Jesus, a misbelief which often renders Christianity pallid and listless. We are happy to talk about the Jesus who walked the shores of Galilee long ago. We have him at a safe and historical distance.

This Jesus loves children and we think that is a good idea too. He cares for the helpless, that is something we approve of as well. So we teach Sunday school, minister to shut-ins, and do other safely good things.

But these and many other similar things are done for a Jesus who is distant, here once-upon a time, but now safely up in heaven where we hope He will stay until the last day, preferably long after we are gone to heaven.

There is something wrong with this picture. This is **not** how the Bible talks about Jesus, nor does it reflect what seems to have driven Paul and others of those first generations of Christians. They were on fire in their Christianity and quite often doing dangerous, even subversive things in the name of this Jesus.

Jesus, this glorious, incandescent Jesus is also right here. He promised as much in Matthew 18 when He said that wherever two or three gather in my name, there I am also. It is this glorious Jesus who defies our understanding that keeps that promise of his presence.

Paul and his first-generation Christian friends seem to have operated with this living, glorious presence of Christ who looked a lot more like the Jesus aglow on the mountain top than the itinerant preacher of the Gospels. It was this Jesus who knocked Paul off his high horse on the way to Damascus and it is this Jesus who inspired those Christians to stare down emperors and governors and kings, sometimes executioners too.

Our Gospel text carries with it that latent and embedded promise. The Jesus who overwhelmed Peter and reduced him to babbling inanities is standing right here. That fact fills our lives with a dangerous and exciting tension. We really don't know what that Jesus will do. He has promised in our baptism that He loves us and will always work for our good, watching over our comings and goings for all time (Psalm 121). But He never promised to do things our way or in a way which we deem safe.

This moved Paul to jump on ships and take to the highways of the ancient Roman Empire to spread this gospel. It has moved other Christians throughout history to do amazing things as well. Some have founded hospitals; others have started schools. Some time ago that Jesus prompted folks to found this congregation. They did not look to reasonable and prudent criteria for those sorts of decisions. They looked to this present Christ who is keeping his promise to us today. Glorious and without our earthbound limitations, for He is both God and Man, he has come today to hear your prayers and songs.

What is He going to do? What does He intend to do with you? This Jesus has gone to the cross to die for your sins and my sins. This Jesus is the creator and Lord of all, whose death on Good Friday is the sacrifice which works this whole world's salvation.

Once, this same peasant Jesus stood on this hill and glowed as He spoke with ancient prophets. Peter, James, and John couldn't handle it. A few months ago, we gathered right here to celebrate this Jesus' birth. At His birth, the shepherds and wise men, the star and the angels proclaimed his birth. Now we and billions gather every year because this birth was like no other this world had ever seen.

This was God coming into this world, this was God in the flesh. In our Gospel, we see this same Jesus just before He sets his face toward Jerusalem and, we get one more glimpse of that heavenly glory that belongs to him. God wants you to know and see today, this Jesus of Nazareth. He is really God. Moses and Elijah were his servants long ago, he led Moses out of Egypt, he answered Elijah's prayer and sent down fire on the sacrifice in his struggle with the prophets of Baal.

The Jesus of Bethlehem who descends from this hill to set his face for Jerusalem is the same Lord of the OT.

On Wednesday of this week, we will gather for the beginning of our penitential season. We will start the long Lenten journey to the cross of Good Friday and the joy of Easter. This day gives us a glowing Jesus to keep us well-lit for that dark journey. What we are given to know from this mountain peak today is that the One whose walk to Jerusalem we here tell is God's beloved Son whose words are life to us, whose death is our salvation.

Yes, it is the valley of the shadow of death. Yes, it is a time of penitence and sorrow, but it is penitence that ends in the cross, where this Jesus, this Son of God, dies for the sins of the world. No one else offers us any hope for that journey. No one else can pay that price or bear that burden. But this Jesus can. He is God's Son; He is beloved, and his words are life itself.

Christ, transfigured before our eyes this morning, has everything it takes to bring us to that other side, where every tear is dried, where heavenly joy is ours, where we shine with him like stars, where the conversation with Moses and Elijah and all the heavenly host never ends.

Who is this Jesus? This is the One who died for the sins of the world. This is the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This is the only One through whom anyone can come to Father. Jesus has done everything necessary and sufficient for your salvation including the gift of faith through His Word.

That is why you can know with certainty the end of the story. It looks a lot like Jesus on this mountain top, filled with glory, conversing with his servants, the whole scene aglow with divine light. You and I get to be part of that picture too. That is the promise of Baptism and Supper and Word. We are there with Peter, James, and John, and when this whole thing is done, we won't be sticking our noses in the dust, but we will stand, citizens of heaven, rightfully there. What else matters?

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide with you to life everlasting. Amen.