

YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE GLORY

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord (Series B)

February 11, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Transfiguration of Our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 9, verses 2 through 9. It is on page 714 of the pew Bible. For a brief moment in time, Jesus allows his divine glory to shine through, and the sight is terrifying. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 9, beginning at verse 2, we read in Jesus' name.

² 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.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you want to see Jesus' glory? Would you like to see Jesus shining resplendent, proving that he really is the Son of God in human flesh? Would you like to see the glory of God?

I suspect you probably do. How marvelous it would be to gaze on the glorious and awesome sight that angels behold—the same glory Moses saw on Mount Sinai or the same glory these disciples saw on that mountain.

For now, "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). We place our eternal hope in something we can't actually see. This is not the easiest way to live. The world calls us foolish for placing our hopes in a God we cannot see. When tribulation and suffering come our way, we start to wonder if God is really there. We wonder if he's really listening. We want to believe, but sometimes it's hard. So we pray, "I believe; help my unbelief" (9:24). And it seems like a vision of Jesus' pure glory would be a good way for God to help our unbelief. Just a glimpse of what Peter, James, and John saw that day—that would be the pinnacle of all religious experience. That would be awesome. But how was it for Peter, James, and John?

Before Jesus goes to the cross, he gives three of his disciples a glimpse of his true glory.

It's a brief, momentary experience where Jesus allows his true glory to shine through. It reveals something about Jesus, but it also reveals something about us.

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What I want you to do today is try to imagine the experience as if you were really there. And, specifically, try to imagine it from Peter's perspective, because there's more going on than just the physical event. There's an interpersonal dynamic at play in the Transfiguration. There is actually strife among the ranks.

The first words of the text are, "And after six days" (9:2). This links the Transfiguration to the preceding section.

Sometimes we have no idea how much time passed between one event and another. In some places it could be a few days or several months. We don't really know. That's because there are many things Jesus did that never got recorded. John says the world itself could not contain all the books that would be written (John 21:25). So we don't really know how many miracles and how many days passed between some of the events in the gospels. It could be a few days, a few weeks, or maybe even several months. But here we know that six days had passed since the preceding section. And Mark tells us this because the events are connected. So if you have your Bibles open, look back to the end of chapter 8. And we find some conflict between Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus had asked his disciples who people were saying he was (8:27). Then he asked them who *they* said he was, and Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (8:29). This, of course, was the right answer. So far, so good. But then Jesus began to teach them what he must *do* as the Christ. Namely, that he "must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Jesus was going to die, and the disciples didn't like the idea. So Peter actually took Jesus aside and rebuked him (8:32). Now imagine that. Peter had just confessed Jesus to be the Christ, and now he rebukes him. He rebukes the Son of God! So Jesus rebukes Peter right back and even calls him "Satan" (8:33). Then Jesus goes on to teach his disciples about the necessity of the cross, both in his life and in theirs. Instead of accepting Peter's rebuke, Jesus doubles down.

So, as you can imagine, this exchange probably created a bit of tension. This would be like strife on a ship between the captain and his first mate. There's a storm to the south and clear sailing to the north. The captain wants to go south, into the storm, but the crew wants to go north, away from the storm. It just seems like common sense. So the first mate speaks up on behalf of the crew, but the captain shuts him down. They're going south, into the storm, and no one is happy about it. The result is a rift between the captain and the crew. That's the kind of tension that exists between Jesus and Peter, and probably between Jesus and the rest of the disciples too.

The thing is, they were looking for the Kingdom of God. They rightly understood that Jesus is the Christ—that is, the Messiah, the Anointed One. And they rightly understood that the Christ is a king. What they didn't understand was the precise nature of this Kingdom. Like many of the Jews, they envisioned a political kingdom. They imagined the Christ would drive the Romans out of Israel, establish his throne, and reign in justice and peace for a good long time. They had seen Jesus' miracles. They had witnessed his power. They knew Jesus was capable of it. They wanted to see him reign in glory. And the cross—that didn't seem to fit into this plan. Death? Are you kidding? That sounds very foolish. Jesus' didn't need to die to establish the kind of kingdom Peter wanted. All he needed to do is exercise the power they already knew he had.

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So there's this tension. Peter wanted Jesus to take the path of glory. But Jesus insisted on the path of suffering. He insisted on going to the cross because his mission was to establish a different kind of kingdom. Eventually, Christ's glory will be revealed, but for now, the Kingdom of God comes through suffering.

So in the midst of this strife, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John on a hike up a high mountain. It's just the four of them. And then Jesus was transfigured before them.

If you don't know what the word "transfigure" means, that's okay. I've never heard this word in any other context before, and that's probably fitting, because nothing like this had ever happened before. It's a unique word for a unique event. His entire appearance changed. His figure was transformed. Matthew says, "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Matt. 17:2). Luke says, "The appearance of his face was altered, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29). And Mark says, "His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them" (9:3). I believe Tide has since claimed credit for this, calling it "a Tide ad." But it wasn't. It was just a miracle.

And then there's a blast from the past. Elijah and Moses appear, and they're talking with Jesus. Now Moses died around 1406 BC (Deut. 34:5), and Elijah was taken up into heaven around 850 BC (2 Kings 2:11), but here they are, talking with Jesus. Moses stands as a representative for the Law in the Old Testament and Elijah for the prophets. Luke says they were talking about Jesus' "exodus" (9:31). That is, his upcoming crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven—his departure from the world. Now this, remember, is the thing Peter didn't really want. But here's Jesus talking about it with two of the big guns from the Old Testament.

And then in the midst of this glorious sight and this conversation between Jesus and these two heroes from the Old Testament, Peter interrupts with what seems like a rather silly idea. He suggests building three tents—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah (9:5).

And we kind of wonder, *What was going through Peter's mind? Why did he want to build these tents?* The popular explanation that I've often heard, and this is the explanation I gave you last year on Transfiguration Sunday, is that Peter wanted to prolong this glorious experience. Remember, Peter wanted to see Jesus reign in glory. So the idea is, now that he sees Jesus' glory, he's thinking, *Yes! Finally! This is great! This is what I've been telling you to do! Let's keep this going! We'll build three tents and just keep this awesomeness going!* This is what I thought last year. But now on further reflection, I think I was wrong. So, yes, it is possible for me to be wrong. The Scriptures are always correct. I am not. So, by the way, when I say something that you think is wrong, please tell me about it, and help me think through it. This way we can all understand the Scriptures better. That would be good.

Anyways, Mark has this little detail that makes me think Peter's suggestion about the tents was not for the purpose of prolonging the glory experience, but for the purpose of shielding him from it. And Mark is the only one who has this detail. He actually tells us what Peter, James, and John were feeling. Right after Peter's suggestion to build the tents, it says, "For he did not know what to say for they were terrified" (9:6). They were *terrified*.

It's similar to the kind of terror we see in the Bible whenever someone is visited by an angel. And this always comes up around the Christmas season, because there's a sudden increase in angelic visits. And it seems the first thing angels always say to humans is, "Do not be afraid"

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(e.g., Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10). The thing with angels is that they reflect the glory of God. That's why they're so terrifying. It's not even *their* glory, but merely the *reflection* of God's glory—kind of like when Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, and his face was shining from the reflection of God's glory, and the people were afraid to come near him (Ex. 34:29-30). And at Christmas time it's remarkable, because the angels reflect God's glory, but Jesus—who is God in human flesh, and possesses all of that glory within himself—refrains from showing that glory. The miracle is that he appears most humbly. But now at the Transfiguration, for a brief moment, he allows his own glory to shine through, and it's absolutely terrifying. It's not like the reflection from angels or the face of Moses. This is the real thing, and it is absolutely terrifying for the disciples.

And why is it terrifying? It's because we are unclean. Sinful human beings are incapable of handling God's glory. And it's not because we're just weak. It's not because our eyeballs are too sensitive. It's because we are unclean. When the prophet Isaiah saw a vision of the LORD in his temple, he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is. 6:5) Isaiah was terrified because he suddenly became aware of his uncleanness.

We are all unclean. This is a way of describing our sinful nature. So we "confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean." It doesn't mean we have dirt between our fingernails. It means that our souls—our very nature—is polluted. So when God appears in his awesome purity, it's a threat to our very being. It's the kind of feeling the dirt on your kitchen counter would have if it could see you standing there with a washcloth. God's purity threatens our very existence, because we feel like he's going to take some washcloth of purity and wipe away the stain of our existence. That's why his glorious presence is so terrifying.

So Peter suggests something along the lines of what Moses did 1400 years earlier when his face was shining. Moses put a veil over his face so the people wouldn't have to look at him. But for Jesus, it's more than just his face; it's his entire appearance. So Peter's suggestion is a lot like the idea of the tabernacle in the Old Testament, again during the time of Moses. God commanded Moses to build this tent, also called a "tabernacle," so they did, "and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34). This way God could dwell in the midst of his people, without destroying them or terrifying them with his presence. It was all contained within the tabernacle.

Now fast forward to Jesus taking on human flesh at Christmas. His body of flesh became his tabernacle (John 1:14), and the glory was bound up within it. But then, for this brief moment at his Transfiguration, it's like the curtains of his tabernacle of flesh are opened, and his glory shines through, and it's absolutely terrifying. So Peter suggests these tents, I don't think to try to prolong this glory experience, but to escape it. He wants to put Jesus in a tent so he doesn't have to look at him—kind of like sunglasses, and kind of like the tabernacle in the Old Testament. Peter can't handle Jesus' glory.

Now if Jesus had asked Peter on the hike up the mountain if he wanted to see Jesus in all his glory, I think Peter would have said, "Yes." That seems to be the kind of thing Peter would go for. But when Peter finally gets a taste of what he thought he wanted, he's terrified.

And then it gets worse. A cloud overshadowed them. It sounds a lot like the cloud that used to come upon the tabernacle in the Old Testament (Ex. 40:34). And a voice spoke. This is the voice of God the Father. He doesn't do this very often. He spoke at Jesus' Baptism, just before

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the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and now he speaks again, just before the end. And he says almost the exact same thing, "This is my beloved Son." But there's one significant addition. He says, "Listen to him" (9:8).

Now we might jump to apply this to our lives—that we should listen to and obey all the things Jesus taught. And that's not a bad application. It's pretty obvious we should do that. But that's not really the point. The words were spoken specifically to these three disciples, and especially to Peter. So think about this from Peter's perspective. Remember, six days earlier they had this disagreement about whether or not Jesus should die. Jesus thought, *Yes*. Peter thought, *No; let's skip that, just establish your throne already*. Now God the Father weighs in and simply says, "Listen to him." That's what this is really about.

The Transfiguration is a glimpse of Jesus' glory for these disciples, so that when they see their master humiliated and beaten and even crucified, they will remember with certainty who he really is. And it's also God the Father's opportunity to weigh in and say, "Yes, the cross is necessary."

So let's put this all together. The disciples wanted to see Jesus in his Kingdom of Glory. And that's not bad. That Kingdom is good, and Jesus' glory is good. But their desire was a little bit naïve, because they didn't realize they really couldn't handle the glory. It's too strong and too pure. Something else had to happen first. Jesus had to take our uncleanness. He had to take our impurity into himself. He actually had to become sin for us. He had to walk the path of suffering, all the way to the cross and into death. This is what he did to wipe that impurity away. For us to try to experience heaven without the purification of our sins would be a living hell. We would be perpetually terrified.

Even today, you and I live in a similar state to Peter, James, and John. Yes, we are on this side of the cross. Our sins have been forgiven. We even have a new nature. But our sinful nature still clings to us. We are still by nature sinful and unclean. We still can't handle the glory. The sight of the Transfiguration would still terrify us. But the next time Jesus appears in glory that will all change. Because Jesus comes in glory to raise the dead, to judge the living and the dead, and to transform his believing saints into his perfect image. On that Day the sinful nature with all its uncleanness will fall away. The purification Jesus accomplished by his blood will be realized in every cell of our bodies. Just like Moses and Elijah, we will stand with glorified bodies and souls, face-to-face with Jesus. Instead of being terrified like the disciples were—instead of offering to build a tent to hide Jesus in—we will stand glorified with him as partakers in his glory.

And all of this is because Jesus went to the cross. He was not deterred by Satan, or even by his friend Peter. He went to the cross. He suffered, died, and rose again. And so we long for the glorious Day of his return. We pray to see his glory without fear.

He who testifies to these things says, "**Surely I am coming soon.**" Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)