

Transfiguration Sunday

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 (NIV)

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Text: Mark 9:2-9 NIV

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) ⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sermon: Jesus Transformed.

Who here has looked through a microscope or a telescope?! Once you have looked through a microscope, the world of the miniature will never be the same again. Everything now has more potential, more variety, more patterns and fascination than it first seemed. The same is true when you look at the night sky through a telescope and see the lunar landscape as never before, or to see the four main moons of Jupiter. What was hidden to the naked eye has been revealed and we are left with a sense of awe, majesty, and perhaps we are a little humbled in light of our ignorance. There is more to the world than we imagine; hold on that thought as we consider the Transfiguration of Jesus.

We struggle to comprehend such an unusual passage today. This strange episode may simply seem to us modern readers to be a bizarre, other-worldly experience for Peter, James and John. It is shrouded in mystery; mystical experiences can do that. But we should not simply dismiss Mark's message on that account. An obvious way for us to enter into this text is to consider the divine voice from heaven that proclaims, "*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*" This reiterates the divine affirmation that God gave to Jesus at his baptism, which we heard about a few weeks ago. Remember, that on that occasion, the voice from heaven was *only* heard by Jesus. In today's unexpected encounter, those words are directed to Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of disciples.

Up until now, the true identity of Jesus, as Mark portrays it, has been an *implicit* secret – only known to Jesus himself. That being said, remember Mark's opening verse to his *readers* announces the true identity of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, something Mark affirms because of the fact of the risen Christ. But, we must wait patiently for Mark's narrative to unfold as we continue our journey with the disciples. Here, in the Transfiguration, Jesus' identity as the Messiah is *explicitly* revealed, but only to these three disciples who are then strictly told *not* to tell anyone about this experience until "after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." We will explore that cryptic comment in a moment. Although the three disciples are naturally afraid to be in the presence of such holiness, and puzzled as to what it might mean, we know – like all Mark's readers – that they will be able to make better sense of it after the resurrection. But witnessing the Transfiguration is more than just an encouraging the spiritual high on their journey with Jesus, it is a turning point in Mark's gospel, because Jesus now begins the journey towards Jerusalem – and to the events of Easter. Let us explore the story, briefly.

To understand the transfiguration in *literary* context, we need to appreciate what this story would have meant to Jews and Greeks at that time. First, the language is rooted in Greek traditions about gods walking the Earth in human form and manifesting their divine glory or radiance. This Greek notion is adapted to Hebrew accounts of "theophany," where God vividly reveals himself in the Old Testament. One such example occurred when Moses went up Mount Sinai, which was covered in a cloud - symbolizing the presence of God. When Moses later appeared out of the cloud, his face shone

brightly and the Israelites were afraid to come near him, and he had to cover his face with a veil.¹ The Old Testament writers knew that God's presence was *not* uniform, but could occur with heightened intensity on rare, special occasions. In such occurrences, whether they were in a burning bush, or in a cloud, or a whirlwind, or in a still small voice, the divine presence was not fleeting, but intense and profound. Consider too the vision of Jacob's ladder, when the veil of the ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing God at work is drawn back, and a fuller reality of what God is going in the world is disclosed. This is the literary context of this today's dramatic epiphany.

So what *was* the inner reality being revealed here? The connection with Moses and Elijah reveals that Jesus is completing the tasks begun by the great lawgiver, Moses, and Israel's great prophet, Elijah. Moses and Elijah were vital in preparing the way, Jesus is finishing the job.² Incidentally Elijah was thought never to have died, and was taken directly to heaven in a chariot of fire. There were also Jewish legends at the time that claimed Moses himself never died in the wilderness. Since these two people, along with Enoch, were considered to live in the presence of God, this transformation of Jesus that they witness should have permitted the disciples, upon later reflection, to glimpse what the resurrection entails. But for the moment, this is primarily an affirmation that Jesus is indeed the anointed One of God, the true Messiah.³ But there is more than just a connection with the past figures of Moses and Elijah. There is also an allusion to the future coming of the Son of Man in all his glory, when he comes to judge the nations. This is signified in the bright clothes that Jesus wears which is reminiscent of the Son of Man in the cryptic prophecy of Daniel, and further indicates that Jesus himself belongs in the divine domain. So while Mark's language uses Old Testament imagery, the vision of Jesus in glory is also a glimpse *into the future*.

As Peter, James and John come down from the mountain, Jesus gives them a cryptic timeframe, in that he tells them not to reveal what they have witnessed until "the Son of Man is risen from [among] the dead" (9:9). Not surprisingly, this puzzles them. In Jewish thought at the time, the resurrection would happen to *all* the righteous *at the end of time*, not to *one* person ahead of all the others. What did Jesus mean by implying that the Son of Man would rise from among the dead, while *they* would still be living some sort of normal life in which they would be able to tell others what they had experienced months or years before? While Mark's readers would already know about the resurrection of Jesus, these characters in the story certainly didn't, and *they weren't expecting it*. Like much of what Jesus said, it remained a puzzle until *after* the resurrection.

But there is more: Mark sandwiches the Transfiguration of Jesus between two incidents in which Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. Jesus tells his followers that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed, and after three days rise again (8:31; 9:30-32). On each occasion the disciples demonstrate their inability to accept that the Messiah must suffer and die before being

¹ Exod 24: 15-18; 34:29-35.

² See also Mal 4:4-5.

³ We must understand this in terms of Jesus being Messiah, rather than him being divine, in a later Trinitarian sense.

raised in glory. This would be in contradiction to all Jewish expectations of a Messiah, and what is meant by the kingdom of God. The Transfiguration, then, only sharpens the paradox of the cross. Not only does God's own beloved Son die, but his death is at the hands of his enemies. Even the affirmations of exaltation and entry into the "glory of the Father" in Mark 8:38 cannot nullify the unthinkable *scandal* of the cross.

In summary, for Mark, the transformation and glorification of Jesus not only addresses the question of Jesus' identity, but points out that Jesus will enter into his "glory" through suffering and death. Mark's readers, living as they did around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, may have been encouraged by this account of the Transfiguration as being evidence of a now heavenly exalted Jesus. It demonstrates that the kingdom that Jesus had been preaching had indeed been implemented, despite the present turmoil in their world.

Christians today frequently think of the divinity of Jesus in terms of heavenly glory, or the triumph of the second coming, without recognizing the real presence of God on the cross. We tend to think that Jesus is most clearly the son of God in glory, *not* in suffering. This passage challenges us to revise our understanding of how God's presence comes to the world.

"Listen to him!" – says the voice from the cloud, which means, "Believe in Jesus' message." This echoes Deut 18:15, where we read the words of Moses, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. *You must listen to him.*" In this context, it also means that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection are integral to the messianic mission. And that way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him, as the disciples would later discover for themselves.

In conclusion, Mark's account of the Transfiguration is further sandwiched between two stories in which Jesus gives sight to the blind. This highlights the confusion of Peter, James, and John concerning the cross that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. Against this context of their blindness and misunderstanding, the Transfiguration dazzles the senses in its images of unearthly white clothing, along with the presence of Elijah and Moses and the overshadowing cloud that brings divine revelation. A corner of the divine curtain is lifted and these disciples are permitted a glimpse and to hear who Jesus really is. The whole scene is addressed to us today, as we also struggle to see, hear, comprehend, and believe in the reality of the kingdom of God. Will we recognize, along with the worlds of telescopes and microscopes, that our universe has many layers - many dimensions - and some of them are normally hidden from us? Will we recognize the risen and gloried Christ who still reigns today? Amen.