

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord + February 11, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Listen to Him

The Word of the Lord from Mark 9:7: "And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is My beloved Son; listen to Him.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Our gospel lesson begins, "After six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John;" and, as curious listeners, you're naturally asking, "Six days *after what?*" Good question. Well done.

It's six days after Jesus asking His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" It's Peter who gets it right, who says, "You are the Christ." It might seem obvious to you, after eight chapters of teaching and miracles, that Jesus is the Messiah; but plenty of people have gotten it wrong so far: many are guessing that He's John the Baptist, Elijah or some other prophet brought back from the dead. But Peter, having watched and listened to Jesus all this time, makes the right confession of faith and says of Jesus, "You are the Christ." It's a profound moment, and that's what happens six days before.

This happens too: now that the disciples are confirmed in the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus tells them how the Christ is going to win salvation for the world. He tells them that the Son of Man 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. You and I say, "Yup, that's the Gospel," without much thought; but to the disciples who hear this plan for the first time, it's horrific. The notion that the Christ has come to suffer and die is as nonsensical as it is ghastly.

Once again, it's Peter who responds to Jesus' words. He pulls the Lord aside and begins to rebuke Him: clearly, Peter believes he knows better than the Christ as to what the Christ should be doing. Or perhaps he does not, for Jesus publicly declares that Peter is essentially Satan for denying that the Christ must die for the sins of the world. Then Jesus turns to the crowd and says:

"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." (Mk. 8:34-38)

You've got three pretty significant things that happen six days before our text. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Peter denies the work that Jesus has come to do, and Jesus declares that the life of the Christian in this world will be one of suffering until He comes again in glory.

After six days, Jesus takes with Him Peter and James and John, and leads them up a high mountain by themselves. There, He's transfigured before them: He radiates light so that His clothes are intensely white beyond bleach-ability: the divine nature of Jesus, usually hidden within His humanity, is peeking through.

He's not alone, either: Elijah and Moses are talking with Jesus. Two of the greatest Old Testament prophets are talking to Him, and they're not condescending about it, either: they lived their lives in hope of the Christ who was to come. In all that they did and all that they suffered, they were preparing the way of the Lord – they were speaking hope to His people of old, bidding them to remain

repentant and steadfast in God's promise of the coming Messiah. He's finally come, and Luke tells us in His gospel that they're not engaged in idle chit-chat on that mountain. They speak with Jesus about His departure, His exodus from this world via the cross, the grave, resurrection and ascension. Where Peter denied the plan for the Christ, Moses and Elijah now stand in front of him and confirm that Jesus is right.

Peter speaks, his third recorded speech of the week. He says, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." I've always been lulled into thinking that this is Peter rejoicing in the mountaintop experience; that, far away from the needy crowds below, he's proposing that they all take up residence for a while. That might be true, but there's a problem with this interpretation: along with James and John, he's terrified at the sight. People don't usually say, "I'd like to make camp and stick around because I am scared out of my mind." I wonder if, instead, Peter is saying this: "When Israel was wandering in the wilderness, the Lord was with them in that big pillar of cloud by day. During that time, He chose to dwell in a tent: because His glory was terrifying to His people, He concealed His glorious self in the tabernacle. If Jesus is going to be radiating glory like this, I think I'd be a lot less terrified if Jesus concealed Himself in a tabernacle; and, for good measure, let's find a place for Moses and Elijah too."

Or to put it another way: Peter finds the Transfiguration to be too *intense*; so he'd like the major players to be *in tents*.

I'll just move along now.

Speaking of the Lord in a pillar of cloud, a cloud overshadows them; and a voice from the cloud speaks, which I'm guessing is not *less* terrifying. But the words are good words, for the voice declares, "This is My beloved Son; listen to Him." God the Father speaks a blessing upon His Son once again. He's said it before, right? You heard God the Father bless His Son just a few weeks ago: when Jesus stood in the Jordan and was baptized with all those sinners, the heavens opened and the Father said, "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased."

At Jesus' baptism, the Father said, "My beloved Son, I am well-pleased that You number Yourself with sinners, that You are taking Your place with them so that You might take their place for them on the cross." Now, as the cross is drawing ever closer, the Father speaks again: Jesus is still His beloved Son; and so, He commands the disciples, "Listen to Him." Even if you don't like what He says, even if you find it unbelievable, listen to Him. He is the beloved Son ... who, at the moment, is also radiating light so white that it makes lightning appear to be a dingy beige.

Then, suddenly, the Transfiguration is over. Jesus only is left in front of His disciples. No Moses, no Elijah, no transfiguring light. Just their teacher, who tells them to tell no one about what has happened until He is risen from the dead.

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Back to Peter. As we've mentioned, we hear him speaking three times in those six days. First, he confesses Jesus to be the Christ when Jesus is teaching and performing miracles: Peter is most comfortable with Jesus when life is comfortable, when things are going well, when it appears that Jesus has come to make normal life a little bit better. The second time, Peter denies the gospel – and has the audacity to rebuke Jesus! – when he hears Jesus say that the Christ must suffer and die, then rise again on the third day. Peter is not comfortable with Jesus going about salvation – he is not comfortable thinking of Jesus as beaten, crucified and dead for our redemption. Finally, the third time, Peter speaks when Jesus is transfigured, when He visibly proves that He is the Christ, and that the Christ is the Son of God in human flesh. Peter not comfortable with Jesus in His glory, either: as he was repelled by the thought of a crucified Jesus, he's terrified at a glorious Jesus. It's no mystery why: the more glorious and

holy Jesus appears, the more Peter realizes how holy and glorious he is *not*. For a sinner to be so close to the Lord in His glory is a terrifying thing.

But blessed be Peter for this: despite his volatile reactions, he does what God the Father bids him to do: he listens to the beloved Son who keeps speaking His Word. Even after Peter denies Jesus three times during the Lord's trial, he is not lost; for he hears the Lord's absolutions after the resurrection, and he trusts in Jesus, the Christ.

I would venture to suggest that you're closer to Peter than you might want to be. What I mean is that you are most comfortable with Jesus when life is going along quite well and quite normally. That's sort of a default for many who consider themselves Christians in America: a few years back when he released a sweeping study on Christianity in our nation, Christian Smith observed that an awful lot of "Christians" tend to regard Jesus as sort of a cosmic therapist and butler – on call when they need Him, but otherwise sitting around His heavenly study somewhere and letting us live our lives as we see fit. I pray that it is not quite that bad with you: however, it is always tempting to think that following Jesus is mostly about living a decent and enjoyable life, being kind to those around you, and counting on Jesus to deliver you when you get into a tough situation. None of that is wrong, but it's a rather shallow, immature sort of faith. It's not quite a faith that says, "In Him we live and move and have our being," nor one that looks to Him for daily bread and daily breath. Such a faith tends to fall into the trap of thinking, "I know that Jesus loves me because life is going pretty well, because I haven't run into anything too terrible that *I* can't handle." It gets lulled into using a good life as proof of God's love, rather than God's Word; which is why, when life is going well, Christians tend to ease up on going to church, as well as daily devotions and prayer. In other words, when life is going well, Christians tend to focus on enjoying life and so they stop listening to God. When life starts going badly, they're tempted to believe that "cosmic butler Jesus" has let them down ... and so once again they stop listening to the Lord.

Such an outlook is as easy as it is dangerous: it's your sinful nature setting you up to take a fall. No one gets out of this life without trouble, illness, suffering and tragedy. It's only a matter of time. If you are enjoying a relatively happy and blessed existence right now, thanks be to God; and know that the Lord has mercifully provided you with this peaceful time to study His Word, to grow in faith, and to prepare for whatever trials lie ahead. After all, it would be foolish to sign up for a marathon, then fail to prepare for it by extensive training. If trouble is inevitable and it is only a matter of time until your faith is tested, then why would you not make use of this time to strengthen your faith as much as possible? And how is your faith strengthened? By the Word of God, particularly His Word of grace for you for the sake of Jesus.

In other words, in the best of times and at all times, the Father points to His Word and says, "Here is My beloved Son. Listen to Him."

We noted that Peter was most uncomfortable with the prospect of Jesus' death: so much so that when Jesus declared that He had come to die, Peter rebuked Him and declared that Jesus' death for the sins of the world – His death for *your* salvation – must *not* take place. It's no secret that many Christians are uncomfortable with the gospel today: some "experts" have likened Jesus' death to "cosmic child abuse" by God the Father, while others argue that it's such a turn-off that preachers should kind of shuffle it towards the back of Christian teaching. That's a far cry from the apostolic ministry, from St. Paul who declared, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). It's true enough that a crucifixion is never attractive, but Jesus' death is life-giving for you. Think of it this way: Jesus' transfiguration is as glorious and powerful as He appears on earth before His second coming, but no one is saved because Jesus is transfigured. Salvation is yours because Jesus, revealed to be both God and man at the Transfiguration, goes to the cross and dies for your sins.

If you keep coming back here for worship, then you're not opposed to the message of Christ and Him crucified (or else you're terribly good at not listening). At the same time, take care that you haven't

built up a resistance to it. The temptation for you will be to make Jesus' cross a historical event of long ago, not something that is important for you here and now. What I mean is that it's tempting to gloss over your sins, quickly admit that you know you're sinner, and not subject yourself to the embarrassment of examining yourself for the full array of sins you have actually committed. If you wish to have a true appreciation for Jesus' sacrifice, you need to appreciate how terribly much you need it: part of the horror of that death is the shame of how much you have made it necessary. On the other hand, the less you appreciate Jesus' death for your sins, the less you will see your sins as problematic.

That is why you heed God's Word to listen to His beloved Son. You listen to His law and examine yourself. You honestly confront your sins. You confess them, confident in the wonder that the Son of God has died for you. Then you listen to His Word of absolution, and you trust that you are forgiven because Christ has made that sacrifice to give you life.

Which brings us to the third of Peter's speeches. He speaks on the mountain because he is terrified and doesn't know what to do. He is terrified because he sees a bit of Jesus' glory, and that shining casts his sinfulness in sharp relief. He's not the only one: the end of Revelation 6 portrays a world of unbelievers when Jesus returns in glory. Seeing Him fully as the Son of God, they beg the mountains to fall on them – they prefer to be buried in an avalanche to being in the presence of God.

As a Christian, you look forward to Jesus' coming in glory on the Last Day, for then you are delivered to everlasting life. Take care, however, and be prepared. It is easy to take it for granted now: but there will be times when all you see is your sinfulness, and your sinfulness seems so great that it blots out Christ and His grace. This is one of the devil's most persistent temptations on those who are dying: impending death proclaims the wages of sin, and the devil tempts the people of God to believe that they are far too unholy to stand in the glorious presence of God, that their sins are far too great to be forgivable. It is, perhaps, the most terrifying aspect of dying – and it is a terror similar to that of Peter on the mountaintop. It is why it is so important that we keep such brothers in sisters in prayer, that we visit them so that they are not alone, and that we put the news of Jesus and His forgiveness in their ears.

See, no matter how great your sins, and no matter how unforgivable they might seem to you, Christ has died for them all. The beloved Son keeps assuring you of this in His holy Word: that is why the Father bids you to listen to Him.

The Transfiguration is a marvelous moment: Jesus reveals Himself to be holy God before He makes His way to Calvary. But Calvary is more wonderful yet, because there the holy, beloved Son of God takes your place and dies for your sins. Then He rises again, lives and reigns over all things for your good.

As He lives and as He reigns, the transfigured, crucified, risen and glorified Lord preserves His Word among us. He preserves His Word so that you might listen to Him.

So, listen to Him as He says to you, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen