

“Listen”

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

Mark 9: 2-9

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The Gospel of Mark has 16 chapters. So to say that this lesson from the 9th chapter comes at precisely the midpoint of Mark’s Gospel isn’t particularly insightful. It’s simple math. But what is notable is *why* Mark puts the story of Jesus’ transfiguration where he does. There’s a reason Mark puts this story sits at the very fulcrum of his gospel. It’s his way of dividing his gospel in half... of saying this story marks a shift to take note of—a shift in Jesus’ ministry, as well as a shift in his Gospel’s focus.

And in a nutshell, the shift is this. Throughout the first half of his gospel, Mark strives to demonstrate who Jesus is—that he really is, in fact, the Messiah—filled with glory and truth. But throughout the second half, rather than prove who Jesus is, Mark strives to make clear what his Messiahship is all about—just what power and glory actually entail.

You can see the shift rather easily by noting the specific events that happen within each half of Mark. If you do, you find that the first 8 chapters of the gospel contain 18—count ‘em—18 miracle stories. 18 miracle stories revealing that this man named Jesus is full of divine power... capable of incredible feats!

Over the past few weeks, we’ve explored three of them in detail:

- Jesus healed the man with the demoniac in the synagogue
- Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law
- Then, Jesus healed just about everyone in the whole darn town of Capernaum.

But really, that’s just the proverbial tip, as Mark spends the next 7 chapters driving home just how grand and glorious Jesus really is. As Mark tells it, along his way to the mountain we read about this morning, Jesus:

- Heals a leper in the deserted wilderness.
- Cures a man of his withered hand
- Heals a man plagued with an evil spirit
- Stills a storm that was terrifying his disciples
- Heals another man suffering from an evil spirit.
- Heals a hemorrhaging woman who reached out just to touch his cloak...
- Brings a dead little girl back to life.

We also see Jesus:

- Feeds five thousand men, women, and children who gathered near him with just five loaves and two fish
- He walks on water
- Cures just about everybody with any sort of ailment in a town called Gennesaret
- Heals the daughter of a Syro-phoanician Woman...
- Cures a deaf man

- Feeds over 4,000 men, women, and children, this time with seven loaves and a few small fish
- And then cures a blind man at Bethsaida...

Again, for anyone counting, that's 18 miracle stories in the first 8 chapters alone revealing that this man, this Jesus of Nazareth, really is the Messiah... the One sent from God to reveal God's glory and power!

Which makes sense, don't you think? Miracles... glory... power... These are things that disciples can rightly expect of a Messiah. Glory is what we expect of the Son of God... and, after experiencing 18 miracles first-hand, it's easy to understand why his followers would expect more of the same.

Except more of the same is not to come. Not in Mark's Gospel, anyway. Instead, while 18 miracles compose the entire first eight chapters, the next eight contain just 2—count 'em—2 miracle stories.

From here on out (as we shared), Mark will no longer focus on demonstrating that Jesus is powerful and glorious, but will strive to reveal just what this glory and power are really all about.

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It's a lesson Jesus begins teaching his disciples right before our lesson picks up this morning... at the end of chapter 8. "You can't see it yet," he tells them, "but soon I'm gonna suffer... and suffer greatly." Jesus tries to tell them how he who'd healed so many would soon be rejected... mocked... ridiculed... and killed... and after three days, rise again.

It's absurd, really... the notion that someone as glorious as the Messiah—God's own self—could suffer so much. Absurd that someone with the power to raise people from the dead could actually die himself. So absurd, that Peter won't hear of it. So Peter jumps up and yells at Jesus. "Remember who you are, Jesus. You're the Messiah. Stop all this nonsense talk of suffering and death."

But Jesus won't stop. He wants them to know... he needs them to know... glory and sacrifice can't be separated. Power and service—they're synonyms.

So Jesus rebukes Peter, and tells the disciples plain as day, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Glory and sacrifice can't be separated. Power and service... they're intimately connected.

But as plain as he was, the disciples still don't hear him. As the gospel makes clear, the disciples go on to argue over which one of them is the greatest... They continue to seek glory for themselves and for Jesus... failing to understand, each and every time Jesus tries to warn them, that his glory... his power... his Messiahship is about something far greater than anyone in this world could expect.

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Which is why Jesus' transfiguration is so, so important for the disciples... and for us.

For at the top of that mountain, what happens? Jesus is transfigured. He's literally changed—radiating with glory. And as he stands there with Elijah and Moses, the divine voice echoes from the heavens repeating the words we read about at Jesus' baptism. Except, instead of being spoken to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved," this time God speaks directly to the disciples. "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him!"

"Listen to him!"

It's as if God is doing Jesus a solid, pleading with the disciples, "Please stop assuming and start listening to him! Stop assuming Jesus will ever fit into your own expectations of what a Messiah is and what a Messiah does... and listen to him. Stop presuming to know the answer before he reveals it. Stop presuming to know where he's leading before you arrive. Stop presuming to understand the deep, deep truths he has come to reveal until you have tasted the last supper... scene the bloody cross... and encountered the risen Lord."

For as it was then, this world is still horribly resistant to something as offensive as unconditional love and redeeming grace. No... we prefer glory for ourselves and judgment on those with whom we disagree.

So the message to those disciples remains just as true for us today. For so many of us—pastors often the guiltiest of all—come to church thinking we already know the answers. Like Peter rebuking Christ, we often come to church looking to have our expectations affirmed, rather than our illusions stripped away. We come wanting to hear our biases assuaged... our limited perspectives condoned. We come wanting to hear that our way is the right way. That our paths of discipleship are full and complete.

Never mind the pains of those in need that can be heard if we're but willing to listen to them... Never mind that the cries of refugees can be heard emanating across the world right now if we're but willing to listen to them... Never mind the sounds of our society's sexism... and blatant bigotry if we're but willing to listen to it.

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As Jesus tried to reveal over and over again, the ways of God's kingdom are not yet our ways—and we can't pretend they are. For the ways of God's grace are unlike anything else this world knows. Which is why even disciples so often get grace wrong—trying to limit it or twist it to fit into societal standards rather than kingdom ways.

So as we enter into this Lenten season... I want to share that TPC is offering some special Lenten small groups that will seek to truly listen to Jesus' Gospel as compared to some of society's manipulative twists on the Gospel. I invite you to join one.

But if you don't, I still invite you to spend the Lenten season we approach heeding the voice from the cloud... releasing the illusion that glory doesn't include sacrifice or that real power isn't found in service. And instead of seeking affirmation of what we already believe, let us heed that voice from the clouds and listen. Let's listen as the glorious good news of God's unconditional love for you and love for all increases our awareness, challenges our assumptions, and expands our horizons, inviting us to live into the fullness of God's glorious kingdom, and all that glory entails. Amen.