

Mark 9:2-9
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 11, 2024

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

Our text, the transfiguration of our Lord, recorded by St Mark this way: “And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It’s somewhat odd, but admittedly common, that we sinners often are more enamored with the presence of Elijah and Moses at our Lord’s Transfiguration than we are with Christ himself or the voice of the Father from heaven. The mention of Moses’ and Elijah’s presence on the mountain peak certainly makes the occasion more mysterious, as the Old Testament figures seem so out of place, yet equally seem to divinely bridge together the various ages that all are encouraged by what is here happening.

Our Old Testament and Epistle Readings add to our wonder at their presence, and we’re reminded by these readings just how significant and unique these men were in the Old Covenant. Moses’ uniqueness is perhaps well-known through his leadership of Israel, but it’s the Old Testament Reading that reminds us not just of Elijah’s departure from this world, but

perhaps also hints to us a reminder that Moses departed the world so uniquely. Where Elijah was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot and never died, Moses was taken by the Lord in a death and burial known only to them, as Moses pre-records its occurrence in the final chapter of Deuteronomy.

Their mysterious departures from earth highlight their Old Testament significance, and now their mysterious reappearing upon the earth certainly captures our attention. And, not only ours, but Peter's! – "Rabbi, it is good we are here," Peter exclaims, "Let us build three tents – one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." And yet, to Peter's credit, the text says that he does not say this out of trivial gratification of 'excitement,' as we 21st century people want everything to be about. No, to Peter's credit, he says it in great awe, almost as a defense-mechanism, because the sight is *terrifying*, overwhelming, the sinner being incapable of taking it all in and comprehending such a glorious sight and such a bridging together of history.

But of course, Moses and Elijah are not present simply to add to the sight or to draw attention to themselves or even to bridge time for "time travel's" sake. They are there to point to Christ. All of history points to Christ. If we want to look back into the Old, Moses and Elijah turn us around and point us to Christ. All the Law (Moses) and all the Prophets (Elijah) point to Christ.

And, in the Jews' own anticipatory expectation, the 'Prophet like unto Moses' (we heard that in Deuteronomy a few weeks ago)... that Moses-like-Prophet and Elijah were supposed to precede the coming of the Christ! Remember how the Jews confessed that before John the Baptist: "If you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, why are you baptizing?"

Yes, let everyone understand, Moses and Elijah represent all things of history, all things of God's Old Covenant with His people in history... all Old Covenant things pointing *forward to* and in eager anticipation of this coming Christ. And, here is that Christ, transfigured in glory, that the disciples might know that this Jesus is the One to fulfill the mission of salvation promised in the dawn of history.

Haven't we heard much about that "One to fulfill the mission" this Epiphany season? – how everything in the first chapter of Mark is about Jesus being the One for the mission of salvation. And everything we meditated upon during these Epiphany weeks is all summarized and highlighted in this morning's text in pinnacle fashion – Jesus identified as the One for the mission, the central element of His preaching (true, He doesn't preach in this scene, but what does the voice from heaven say: "This is My Son! *Listen* to Him!)... Certainly highlighted (as we heard earlier in Epiphany) is his authority, his glory as the Only

Begotten of the Father... Even his sending out of fishers of men is highlighted when he tells them not to tell anyone *until* He is risen from the dead. And, perhaps most highlighted in all of it is that this glorious One preaches, “repent and believe the gospel!” Where do we see that in this scene text but that they trembled before the holy God, they recognized the great terror of being unholy sinners before the holy God, they buried their faces in the dirt before the holy God – *that’s* an image of repentance, isn’t it?, just as Isaiah had once claimed when seeing the holy God in his temple, “Woe is me! I am doomed! I have seen the Lord of hosts!” – but the angel came and touched Isaiah’s lips and said, “Your iniquity has been taken from you.” And what do we see in our text? What becomes of the trembling before the holy God? How is the ‘experience of repentance’ calmed and comforted to ‘believe the gospel’? They look up and see only Jesus. The text says, “And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.” Yes, there’s what it means to believe the gospel. See Jesus only. You’re safe with Him. You’re forgiven with Him. Being in the presence of God is calm with Him.

Isn’t it something how glorious and perfect we think we want life to be (as we should, God’s holy will is perfect)... but, we think we could actually *handle* God’s glory and perfection, *live* in perfection, *make* perfect decisions, *maintain* a perfect daily life,

depend on perfect Christians, that – if we can just capture it and build tents for this perfection – all would be well... Heaven on earth! But, then, when we're confronted with anything that even hints at 'perfect' or flawless, we can't handle it because we know we'll mess it up!

- Perfect car? We stop walking on egg shells once we finally notice the first scratch.
- Perfect A at the semester's beginning? Might be an A- or B or even lower by semester's end.
- Perfect wedding day? The marriage will prove our imperfections.
- 'Perfect' reputation before men? You can't pretend forever; if they look long enough, they'll see the real you.

And because we know our version of glory is so fleeting, we're sure that which is good will slip through our fingers: When things all seem to be lining up, we suddenly think we're going to blow it. When things are going well, we scare ourselves into believing something's wrong *precisely because* we know our own imperfections, our own sin, and we know we are incapable of ever holding perfection together, of ever capturing it. And, if that's so before mere *earthly* things that only *momentarily* seem perfect, imagine actually wanting the eternal *glory* of God to be unveiled before us sinners! We could never handle it.

We could never stand for a *second* before God and his holiness without proving ourselves so miserably unholy. And the

only remedy to that, the *perfect* remedy to that, the *comforting* and *calming* remedy to that is to look up and see only Jesus. Not “Jesus + Moses and Elijah” or “Jesus + the Covenants” or even “Jesus + my faithful capturing of it all.” Just Jesus only. In other words, “repent and *believe the gospel.*”

What is that gospel? When your sin is too heavy for you, and you are tempted to despair because you think it unforgivable, look up and see Jesus only, for He forgives you.

When daily life and its anxieties pile high upon you, and you are tempted to despair because you think there is no way you will navigate it all correctly, look up and see Jesus only, for He has promised to guard and keep you.

When you come before the holy altar, and there you are tempted to despair because you careen between two extremes – on the one hand, maybe the glory of God isn’t even real because you’ve never seen it... on the other hand, if it’s real as He promises it is, you can’t possibly kneel low enough to the floor to hide your unholiness – when careening between those two extremes, look up and see Jesus only, for He promises to share the glory of God in veiled, approachable fashion: “This is my body; this is my blood – for you.”

When your body and mind are broken and life’s afflictions seem more constant than do healthy days, look up and see Jesus

only, for He will not merely heal you, but He will one day resurrect you.

And that last thought (that ‘Jesus only’ ought point you to the resurrection) that ought remind us to notice that our text is not just about connecting the present moment on the mountain peak with the *past*, but also with the *future*. The disciples (and us, as the secondary audience) needed to know not only that this Jesus was the One for the mission so that the cross might ‘take,’ but they also needed to know that this One going to the cross was the One of glory... in other words, that He was not just leading them and His Church to a life of suffering, a life that would end in death, but a life that will consummate in resurrection and glorious bliss.

To be sure, the most simple way to “repent and believe the gospel” is to rejoice that Christ has died for your sins and that you are justified before God and forgiven in heaven. The truly is “the gospel” in the most immediate sense. But Jesus doesn’t just preach “I died for you” or “I forgive you” ...because he knows you wonder how such past and present grace makes certain your *future*. He doesn’t just point you to history (your past sinfulness atoned for) and to the present (your current baptismal life sustained), but He also points you to the future. He *thinks in terms of* and *plans for* and *promises* that which He still has in store. Even

in our text, he's thinking of and instructing his disciples regarding *the future*: "Don't say anything *until* the Son of Man has risen from the dead." Yes, this current glory of the mountain peak points forward... points forward to his own resurrection, that his fishers of men may – through the telling of this glory – make us certain in our own future glory.

That's the thing about the transfiguration: it's a picture of God's glory in all three 'tenses' (past, present, future), isn't it? In the book of Ezekiel, God's glory left the temple and ascended a nearby mountain; Jerusalem was now a barren wasteland, for God was no longer with His people. And that *past* glory of God that comforted in history was nowhere to be found *until* it suddenly shows up here in the *present*, on the mountain, in the person of Jesus, so that Peter can speak of capturing it and keeping it here and now in the present. But, the transfiguration does not remain forever; it is not all about the present... it's also about the future: this One who goes to the cross will destroy sin and death by the cross precisely because He is the One who will return in glory.

That promise of his future return in glory can only be certain in our hearts and minds when Jesus completes the work of the cross. But the scene of the transfiguration also only makes sense in our hearts and minds – and the past and future are all

tied together in this Jesus – *only* when Jesus’ work on the cross is vindicated by his resurrection.

“So wait,” Jesus tells the disciples, “wait until I have risen. Then all this must be made known to the nations, that the nations may know I am the One sent for the mission, I am the One for their salvation and deliverance, I am the One that brings meaning to past, present, and future.”

Thus, after Christ’s resurrection, Peter can boldly proclaim, “We did not follow cunningly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.”

Can’t you imagine the joy, all the pent-up excitement Peter must have had in *finally* getting to speak of (and, later, to write of) these things. Almost as if he says, “The Lord *told* us not to say anything until he had risen, but he is risen, and now let us speak freely and point out to you how all these dots connect.” And where does Peter turn with it next? – but to the Holy Word that speaks so firmly of all manner in which Christ tied together past, present, and future:

“We have something more sure, the prophetic Word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until (look to the future) until the day dawns and morning star rises in your hearts.”

And with that prophetic Word fulfilled, to which we pay attention in the holy Scriptures, what does St Paul say with the same resolve and fervor of Peter? How concrete is that for our comfort and certainty? In our epistle reading, Paul says,

“Having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways (or ‘devised myths’). We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing” (for, in truth, it has been unveiled in the person of Jesus on the mountain, on the cross, outside the empty tomb, and when he comes again in glory).

And that unapologetic defiance of Paul’s, and that mountain-top claim of Peter’s, it’s all so concretely set in history (and, therefore, so comforting to our hearts) that we may follow our Lord through the valley of the shadow of death, certain that we will follow Him to the glory of Mount Zion. We may kneel at the foot of His cross, certain that we will one day stand before His throne. How does St

Paul say it: “[we are] fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Yes, life in *this* world and its suffering must precede life in the world *to come* and its glory. Life at the foot of the cross must solemnly precede life at the mouth of the empty tomb. But glory *is* coming... “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us,” Paul says... and we can be sure of that... as, in every affliction, temptation, and sin to be repented of – caused by the world, the devil, and our own sinful selves... in it all, we may look up and see Jesus only.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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