

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 9:2-9
“A Bright Flash of Light”
Year B – The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 11, 2018

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

A camera flashes. A bolt of lightning streaks across the sky. A commercial comes on the TV. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is *not* to turn your head at a flash of light? Somewhere along the line, people in marketing figured this out, too. For a long time now, searchlights have been used in front of theaters, shopping malls, and casinos to draw attention. And nowadays, it's common to see bright lights illuminate various billboards and advertisements. And businesses, even churches, use bright electronic signs so you can see their messages, day or night.

It's all in an attempt to say, “Look here, right now! You may not normally expect to see anything of importance here, or you may have missed it before, but look here, right now, and you won't be disappointed!”

On the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father used light in a similar way. The light of Jesus' Transfiguration drew the disciples' attention to him. There, on the mountain, the Father showed Jesus in a different light than the disciples had ever seen him before. Their friend was not only a carpenter, not only a teacher, not only a rabbi. He was much, much more. “Look here!” the light emanating from Jesus demanded. The Father's voice proclaimed, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!”

This morning, God uses the light of Jesus for our benefit, as well. By sharing with us a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, through His Word, the Father once again draws our attention to Jesus to enlighten *us*. “He's more than you've imagined!” the light exclaims. “Listen to him!”

As Mark tells it, there had been little rest for the disciples. They'd been chasing Jesus from town to town all around Galilee and beyond, finding both amazing expressions of faith in unlikely people, as well as fury from his enemies. They knew that Jesus was someone special—and yet, it was for them like the strange encounter with the blind man at Bethsaida, where the man regained his sight in two separate stages. When Jesus first touched the man, he could see, but could only see blurry people looking like trees walking around. Then Jesus touched him again, fully healing him (Mark 8:22-26).

The disciples also saw. They had seen a lot! But what they saw didn't always make sense to them. And they certainly didn't understand. Things with Jesus were blurry to them. Take what happened just six days before his Transfiguration. As they were scrambling around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples talked all about who the people thought Jesus was—everything from a prophet to John the Baptist. And then Jesus asked the disciples point-blank, “But who do *you* say that I am?” To which Peter famously replied, “You are the Christ” (8:27-30).

Peter saw Jesus, and could even put the correct words to it, but it was all still blurry in his mind. Immediately after, Mark recounts how insufficient Peter's understanding of “the Christ” actually was. Because when Jesus goes on to explain that “the Christ” was the one who would “be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31), this didn't make any sense to Peter. And he began to rebuke Jesus for what he had just said. But it was Jesus who ended up rebuking Peter.

So it was, then, six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain. I'm sure they thought they were going up for some time of prayer. That was something they'd done many times before. It wasn't at all unusual. They'd probably even become used to it, thought it was ordinary.

And for a while that day, it was ordinary—until... until the extraordinary happened. Jesus' clothes became "intensely white, *as no launderer on earth could bleach them,*" it says literally in the Greek (9:3). The divine glory of Jesus shined so brightly, and Elijah and Moses arrived to speak with him. And Peter mutters something, unsure of what to say, because those three disciples were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" Then, just as suddenly as it all happened, everything was gone. No dazzlingly white clothes, no visitors, no voice. The disciples, "looking around... no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only" (9:8). With the blue spots from the light still burning in their eyes and with that voice still ringing in their ears, it was over.

This incredible experience let them know that Jesus was far more than they imagined. "Listen to him," the voice said. They had been startled from the stupor of the ordinary into the significance of the extraordinary... but what now? What did it all mean? It would be some time before they could know. His light had shined in their darkened understanding, but they still hadn't put it all together. It's why Jesus himself charges them "to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead" (9:9). Jesus was obviously more than they ever imagined, but they didn't yet fully know who or what he was.

On one hand, the disciples have us at a serious disadvantage. They were there, and we were not. They saw the light and felt the fear and suffered the confusion and heard the voice. The Transfiguration left enough of an impression on the disciples and the Early Church that it finds its way into all four Gospels. Yet, it was so overwhelming that they found it difficult to put it all into words.

In Matthew, the Transfiguration itself occupies only five verses (Mt 17:1–5). In Mark, only six verses (Mk 9:2–7), and in Luke only seven (Lk 9:29–35). In John, only half of one verse, as he alludes to that overwhelming experience, when he says, "We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14b ESV).

To have been there must have been spectacular and awe-inspiring. What wouldn't we give to be able to travel in a time machine to see what they saw and hear what they heard on that mountain? How could you experience such an event and not be changed—*transformed*—forever?

On the other hand, as we hear the account today, we have a distinct *advantage* over what the disciples were able to recognize that day. *We* know what the Transfiguration means. We know that there on the mountain the disciples were given a vision of something that was to come, something eternal. By peeling back a corner of the veil that is Jesus' human nature, the Father gave them a glimpse of the glory of Jesus which would be his forever, beginning with the cross, his resurrection, and ascension.

We understand why the Christ had to go to the cross and die, and what glorious victory his resurrection meant. It would take time for the disciples to understand, but since *we* have the whole story in view, we can see that on that day, the Father was showing us exactly who it is we're called to follow.

Which begs a question: If we already know that Jesus is the eternal Son, crucified and risen from the dead, reigning now in glory, why do we need to hear the account of the Transfiguration?

It would be simple enough to say that we need to hear this account because it happened. That just because it happened is the reason why it's included in the Gospels. And yet that isn't quite satisfying. Plus, it's somewhat dangerous.

The danger is that we become so accustomed to hearing the Word of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even in something as spectacular as the Transfiguration, that it can all become routine. And when faith in Jesus becomes routine, we miss the transformation that God intends for us. We can become indifferent to it.

But indifference is far from what our Lord is calling us to today. The fact that the Transfiguration is remembered as a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry, and that we dedicate a whole Sunday to this event, should be enough to clue us in that something important is being proclaimed here, and why we need to hear this account.

First, we need to hear this account because it is one of those flashing lights that catch our attention. It's a very brief story, yet like the bright flash of a distant light in the dark, it demands that we look here and see. And when we look—even if we've looked here before—our Lord Jesus, briefly robed in brilliant light, calls us to consider once again more fully who he really is.

And who we see is this man named Jesus, who walked this earth. And in his Transfiguration, he shows us he is also the eternal Son of the eternal Father, whose glory is beyond our imagination. And yet, this eternal Son, full of bright glory, is also the one who was willing to reassume the veil of his human nature, to cover up his glory for a time, so that he could make his journey to the cross.

Which brings me to the second reason we need to hear this account, because we need to hear again and again the Father's words, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" We need to hear the Father's admonition to listen to and believe in His beloved Son, so that we are sure to hear what Jesus has to say.

Today, we stand on the doorstep of the season of Lent, where we will once again journey with our Savior to the cross. And so we listen carefully to Jesus as he tells us that the Son of Man must die, but on the third day rise again. We listen to Jesus as he tells us that being his disciples will cost us our lives, as we are to take up our crosses and follow him, as well. But we also listen to his promise that by losing our lives for his sake and the Gospel's, that our lives will be saved. We're assured that true life is found through the cross of Christ (8:34-35).

Finally, we need to hear this account of the Transfiguration of Christ because, just as Jesus hid his glory for a little while longer, and descended from the mountaintop experience so that he could go to the cross for us, we've been called into our lives in this earthly valley for a little while longer. Where our lives are lived under the cross of Christ. Which means it will not always be easy, or free from pain.

But there is a day of resurrection that is coming on the other side of it all. And on that day, we will share in the victory that Jesus has won for us, where we will behold with our own eyes, we will see just as the disciples did on that mountain, the glory of Jesus Christ. And we will be able to stay, no need to move on, for all eternity.

For us, the account of Jesus' Transfiguration is not routine. It is not something to be indifferent to. It is a bright flash of light that draws our attention again to the truth of who he is. Jesus is the light of God's mercy, the glorified Son, the one to whom we listen, and the one

whom we follow, to the cross, to the resurrection, and to the glory of eternal life. In his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(This sermon is adapted from Rev. Thomas G. Norris, *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, Volume 16, Part 1.)