

SERMON DRAFT

Text: Mark 9:2–9

Sermon: Transfiguration 2021

Transfiguration Sunday is the day toward which the Epiphany season has been moving. Jesus has been demonstrating that he acts with the works of God and teaches with an authority that is his own. He has been doing the very things the prophets foretold would be the marks of God's new covenant and his eternal kingdom and has been proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near.

At his transfiguration, the Father discloses his glory and gives his own approval to what Jesus has been preaching and teaching. The Collect recalls that the transfiguration served to validate, both by the presence of the ancient prophets and by the voice of God himself, the divinity of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament Reading remembers how Elijah, one of the two great prophets who appeared at the transfiguration, was taken to heaven in a whirlwind.

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is not to turn your head at a flash of light? Somewhere along the line the advertising people figured this out too. Bright lights now illuminate signs. Light chases light from bulb to bulb on other signs. And then there are the searchlights in front of theaters, shopping malls, and automobile dealerships.

Advertisers use light 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, the Father used light in a similar way. The light of Jesus’ transfiguration drew the disciples’ attention to him in a new way. There on the mountain, the Father showed Jesus in a different light than the disciples had ever seen him before. Their friend was not just a carpenter, not just a teacher, not just a rabbi. He was much, much more. “Look here!” the light emanating from Jesus demanded. The Father’s voice proclaimed, ***“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”***

This morning, God uses the light that shone from Jesus once again. In this light that shines from the 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!” the Father decrees. In the Transfiguration, God gives us a glimpse of Jesus’ glory so that we listen to Him.

As Mark tells it, there had been little rest for the disciples. They had been chasing Jesus from town to town all around Galilee and beyond, finding the reality of faith in unlikely people and fury from his enemies. They knew that Jesus was something special and yet, it was for them like the strange story of the two-stage healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. When Jesus first touched the man, he could see, but only people who looked more like trees walking around. The disciples saw, but what they saw did not always make sense.

Take what happened just six days before the transfiguration. As they were scrambling around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus and his disciples talked about who the people thought Jesus was.

And then Jesus asked them point-blank, ***“But what about you? Who do you say I am?” To which Peter famously replied, “You are the Christ.”***

Peter saw, but none too clearly, because in the very next paragraph Mark recounts how insufficient Peter’s definition of “the Christ” actually was. And when Jesus goes on to give the title “Christ” the content of his cross . . . what Peter thought he saw just did not make sense.

So now, six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain. They most likely thought they were ascending for prayer. They had done that many times before. It wasn’t at all unusual. They had probably even become used to it, thought it was ordinary.

And for a while that day, it was until. Until the extraordinary happened. Until Jesus’ clothes became impossibly white and Elijah and Moses arrived to speak with him. Until that cloud enshrouded them and added even more to their fear. Until a voice came from the cloud:

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

Then, just as suddenly as it all happened, it was over. No dazzlingly white clothes, no visitors, no voice, only Jesus. 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 vision and voice 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, 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 what did it mean? Jesus was obviously more than they ever imagined, but who, or what, was he?

On the other 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 into words.

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

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 one experience such an event and not be changed transformed?

On the other hand, as we read the story 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 treated to a glimpse of what was to come. By peeling back a corner of the plain brown wrapper of Jesus' human nature to give just a glimpse of the glory that would be his forever after his cross and resurrection.

The Father showed the three disciples who it was whom they were 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 this story?

One could simply say that we need this story because it happened. That just because it happened should be reason enough for it to be included in the Gospels. And yet that is not quite satisfying. That the transfiguration is remembered as a pivotal event in Jesus' ministry should be enough to clue us in that something important is being proclaimed here.

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

The danger, even for those who put their faith in Christ, is that we become so accustomed to hearing about Jesus and hearing his Word that it all becomes routine. Familiarity then breeds indifference to his Word and disobedience to his will. And when faith in Jesus becomes routine, we miss the transformation that God intends for us. So again, today we see Jesus transfigured the eternal Son of the eternal Father, the brightness of his glory beyond our imagination.

Second, we need this story because we need to hear again the Father's words, "***This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!***" We need to hear the Father's admonition to hear and believe that the crucified Messiah is our only hope that in his death and resurrection is our life. We need to hear that only in following Jesus is there ever real life. We need to hear from him that to pursue any way other than the way of the cross is to lose forever the hope of life.

For us, people who too easily grow indifferent to Jesus and his Word, the story of Jesus' transfiguration is a flash of light that draws our attention again to the truth of who he is.

He is the light of God's mercy, the glorified Son, the one to whom we must listen and in whom we must follow.

Amen