

Mark 9:2-9 + Why Are We Here? + Series: We Are His Witnesses
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY
Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Transfiguration of Our Lord + 11 February 2018

“Why are we here?” Peter, James, and John followed their Teacher up the rocky path to the summit of the mountain. The disciples had to catch their breath a few times because they were hiking up the highest peak in all of Israel. Up and up they went, following Jesus away from the other disciples and the crowds and the distractions below. Finally, they stopped near the summit catching their breath at a place where they were clearly all alone.

...But what a view! The disciples looked around at the rugged landscape stretching out below them in every direction. They could see for miles, but as they looked around, something right there on the summit caught their attention. Was it the sun glinting off a patch of snow? It was dazzling, but the glorious light they saw wasn't some atmospheric reflection on the snowy summit. No, glorious light shone from Jesus himself! Jesus **“was transfigured in front of them, and his clothes became dazzling—extremely white as no launderer on earth could whiten them.”** The dazzling glory emanating from Jesus was almost blinding. The disciples had never seen anything so brilliantly white.

They fell down, shielding their eyes. It was like staring into the sun as Jesus, for a brief moment, pulled back his humanity to reveal his glorious divine nature, but what those disciples saw in the transfigured Jesus was terrifying. Only on a few other occasions had they felt so overwhelmed in the presence of Jesus. When Jesus had given Peter and his brother Andrew and James and John a miraculous catch of fish—so many that their boats started sinking—Peter recognized he was a sinner in the presence of God. They had all witnessed Jesus rebuke the wind and the waves during a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee—and nature had obeyed. Of course, they had seen Jesus cast out demons and heal illnesses and feed thousands, but rarely did they recognize Jesus as the holy God. In fact, just a week earlier, Peter felt so comfortable that he thought could rebuke Jesus, when their Teacher spoke of the need to face betrayal and suffering and death and resurrection.

Yet there was no mistaking who Jesus truly was on that mountaintop. They weren't just in the presence of their very human, yet sinless Teacher with whom they lived and conversed day after day. They were in the presence of the holy God himself, and it was terrifying.

So had Jesus brought them there to terrify them, to scare them with his glory? Was he manipulating them so they would repent of their attempts at trying to manipulate him and his power? Or did he have another purpose in bringing them up that mountain? Why were they there?

The first clue we have is who appeared there with Jesus in his glory. Mark tells us, **“Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.”** Two of the greatest Old Testament prophets appeared with Jesus on that mountain, but why were they there? God had given his holy Law through Moses not just to Israel, but to all of humanity. God had proclaimed his Word through Elijah when it was almost completely snuffed out. They represented the Law and the Prophets—all of the Old Testament, but why were they there? **“They were talking with Jesus.”**

Standing in glory with Jesus, they could find no more enjoyable activity than talking with him about what he was about to do. While standing there in glory, they chatted with Jesus not about how foolish his disciples were or would be. No, they discussed with Jesus what they and the rest of the Old Testament had foretold. Moses knew what the glorious Lord standing next to him had come to do—to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, to be the Lord of free and faithful grace, the **“compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth...forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin.”** (Exodus 34:6-7) Elijah knew that the most glorious work of the Lord standing next to him was not in bare displays of divine glory and might, but in the **“gentle whisper”** of his Word.

They were there to confirm to those terrified disciples why Jesus had come, but Peter had another idea. He wanted everyone there to just stay in that moment. **“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it’s good for us to be here. Let us set up three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah...’** You see, Peter was so overwhelmed emotionally, so terrified, yet so amazed that he didn't want to leave that moment, to leave that mountain. But looking back, Peter knew that he didn't know what he was saying. The fact is they weren't there to preserve the moment or keep the glories of heaven here on earth.

So why were they there? We get another clue in the sudden events right after Peter opened his mouth. **“A cloud appeared, overshadowing them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to**

him!’ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.” On only two other occasions did God the Father speak about his one and only Son. He spoke at Jesus’ baptism to both confirm to the world who Jesus was (“**my beloved Son**”) and to confirm that it was time for him to begin his public ministry. Later God the Father would speak about how he would glorify his saving name through his Son mere days before Jesus’ death.

Yet here it’s clear. For the sake of that terrified inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, they needed to be reminded who Jesus was, what he had come to do, and why they should pay attention. Not only was Jesus the Son of Man, but he was also the Son of God. Not only had he come to preach and teach and heal, but to embody God’s love to the world through suffering and death and resurrection. God wanted them to listen to Jesus not only because what he had to say were the words of God himself, but because Jesus was the Word of God. Jesus wasn’t just a glorified prophet like Moses or Elijah, nor was he just the holy Judge who pours out wrath on a sinful world. He was God’s love in the flesh, God’s grace in all its glory, God who had come to save them.

...And just as suddenly, the glory disappeared. Moses and Elijah vanished back into heaven, and the only person those terrified disciples saw was Jesus—their teacher, their Savior, their Lord. Why were they there? They were there with Jesus to be prepared for what was coming once they went back down that mountain. The disciples struggled to wrap their minds around what they had just witnessed as Jesus helped them up and started down the mountain, but on the way he said something strange. **“He ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”** Why do that? If they couldn’t speak about what they had seen and heard, what was the point of traveling up that mountain in the first place?

In many recent movies like Marvel or Star Wars or Disney movies, you’ll find “Easter eggs”—an intentional inside joke or hidden image or respectful nod to someone or something that’s tucked away for fans in the background or among the props or in the dialogue like an old-fashioned Easter egg. In a sense you could say that throughout his three years of public ministry and especially in his final months, Jesus planted all kinds of Easter eggs for his disciples—hints, reminders, and even clear proofs of who he was and what he was about to endure for them. In fact, right before all this, Jesus had made that explicit to his disciples, which had led Peter to rebuke his Lord.

You see, Jesus knew that the road from transfiguration to crucifixion would test them severely. They would be as terrified as they were on that mountain. James would run. Peter would deny, and John would hide in the shadows as their Lord, their Savior, their God suffered and died. Yet Jesus’ resurrection would be the big reveal that would not just reveal their living Savior, but reveal and make clear all those Easter eggs he had laid out for them.

Speaking of Jesus’ transfiguration before his resurrection would’ve only fed the mistaken belief that Jesus had come to establish an eternal kingdom on earth. People would’ve sought his glory, while ignoring his grace. Instead for those three disciples, what they witnessed would sustain them, even at their weakest, during Christ’s suffering and death. It would enable them after Jesus’ resurrection to encourage their brothers and sisters in the faith. What they witnessed would give them ironclad confidence as John and Peter became leaders of Christ’s church and as James became the first of the apostles put to death for his faith. They would look back on how Christ had displayed his glory to them and see how his grace had prepared them. Seeing Christ’s glory through his grace they would understand why they were there.

So why are we here? Why do we gather week after week here in God’s house? Why do we gather week after week around his Word and Supper? Why are we here in this community, this region at this time in history?

Knowing what God can do you might be tempted to wonder. Why doesn’t God just blow people away with his glory? Why doesn’t Jesus just shock and terrify and impress people with his glorious power and might? Then they would come flocking through these doors! Then they would stop rejecting the message we proclaim! Then they would sit up and listen to what we have to say and realize that this is where they need to be!

...But what happens when God only displays his glory? Yes, it terrifies and impresses, and for a time people get it, but Moses and Elijah and Peter, James, and John would tell you that glory doesn’t change hearts. People fall back into their faithless and rejecting ways. As amazing as it would be to see God’s brilliant and dazzling glory on display, people would still fall back in unbelief and sin and return to the well-worn paths that lead to hell.

So why are we here? The Lord’s most glorious work isn’t when he peels back his humanity to reveal his raw divinity, but when he works through his Word to change minds, change futures, change hearts and lives permanently, when he works through his Word to help sinners see their sins forgiven, to see the glorious God cash the check for the wages of all their sins as he himself suffers and dies for them, to see the light of life in

Christ shatter the dark ignorance of unbelief, to see the locked gates of heaven thrown open with the Savior's nail-pierced hands and outstretched arms.

...And he does that glorious work through us, through you, through me talking to people like Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus, pointing people to their gracious Savior as they once did, helping people see the man hanging bloody and battered and bruised on the cross is their glorious God who sacrifices himself for them. To do that work, he prepares and equips us through his Word, through his Supper, through reminding us each week of our Baptisms. That's why we're here, and like those disciples coming down from the mountain, that's why we go from here following Jesus to the cross and tomb, seeing his glory through his even more glorious grace, and looking forward to the next opportunity to share what we have seen and heard. Amen.