THE TRANSFIGURATION

Mark 9:1–13

Key Verses: 9:2b,3

“There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”

*“What are you looking at?”* If we go out to Lake Michigan early in the morning, we can see a beautiful sunrise. If we drive out to a rural area at night, we can see a star-filled sky. Looking at these things can take away our anxieties and busy-mindedness and help us see life in a bigger perspective. On the other hand, sometimes we’re forced to see an act of violence or cruelty that we just can’t get out of our minds, and it haunts us. Some people in their past have seen things that have scarred them for life. Some choose to look at the wrong things. In today’s passage Jesus invites three of his disciples to go with him up a high mountain to see him transfigured. It’s an experience they keep with them the rest of their lives (2Pe1:16–18). Why did he do it? Why did they need to see Jesus like this? And is there any way we can have a similar experience? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1. This is the tail end of what Jesus had been saying in the previous passage. For the first time he predicted his own rejection, suffering, death and resurrection (8:31), and taught that his disciples have to follow his example, denying themselves and taking up *their* cross (8:34). It’s not easy to really accept this. It goes against the grain of our desire to save ourselves and pursue the world. To help his disciples, now he promises that some standing there with him would not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power. It’s not easy to understand. But it connects his predictions of suffering to what’s about to happen.

Look at verse 2a. Jesus gives his disciples about a week of silence, with no further teaching or events, to process what he said. And now he takes only Peter, James and John with him up a high mountain to be all alone with him. He first took these three disciples with him into the room where he raised a girl from the dead (5:37). It was a special revelation of himself that he didn’t want them to talk about just yet. Later, he takes these same three men with him, away from the others, to watch him struggle in prayer just before his arrest (14:33). Jesus repeatedly focuses on Peter, James and John. They were the first disciples he called. They’d made dramatic decisions to leave everything to follow him. They may have been the most eager learners among the Twelve. Jesus had just called Peter “Satan.” James and John would later come to demand top positions in his kingdom (10:35–37). Clearly they have issues. But in his grace Jesus is mentoring these three more deeply, to help them lead the others after he’s gone.

When they’re up the high mountain, all alone, what happens? Look at verses 2b,3. “There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” This was not what Jesus had looked like up until now. Christian art usually depicts Jesus with blue eyes and golden hair, and handsome. But the Bible paints quite a different picture. It says, “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa53:2,3). Until now people saw Jesus as an ordinary carpenter from a small town, Nazareth (6:3). Twice it’s mentioned that he was so busy serving people, he didn’t even have a chance to eat (3:20; 6:31). He would be up before dark, praying (1:35). Most of the time crowds of sick and suffering people surrounded him, and in his compassion he poured himself into caring for them. After three intensive years of ministry he must have looked pain-stricken and exhausted. But now, on this high mountain he’s transfigured.

Look at verses 2b,3 again. This dazzling whiteness is a glimpse of heaven, where God wraps himself in light as with a garment (Ps104:2). Jesus is showing his disciples his original heavenly glory as the Son of God. Later, in his prayer just before his arrest, he mentions the glory he had with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5). The Book of Revelation describes him: “…and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev1:13–16). John wrote: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son…” (Jn1:14). Jesus set aside his heavenly glory to come to our world to serve broken and wounded people until nobody could imagine who he really was.

So why does he want his disciples to see this? It’s to help them get a glimpse of the glory he would have again, after his rejection, suffering and death on a cross. It’s to help them and us see the glory that awaits all those who share in Jesus’ sufferings (Ro8:17,18). When we see his glory and believe his promise that we will share in it, we can stop trying to avoid our cross of suffering and embrace it willingly.

Look at verse 4. Why do Elijah and Moses suddenly appear to talk with Jesus? They were like Jesus in several respects. They both disappeared from earth unusually. They both had to lead God’s people even though they rejected them. In their ministry they both suffered a lot. But now they appear in glory. Their lives didn’t end in bitterness and death, but in God’s glorious presence. Some people like to teach, even though they haven’t suffered or lived by what they taught. But because of their experiences, Elijah and Moses could actually relate to Jesus and encourage him as he faced the way of the cross. Even Jesus’ closest disciples couldn’t be an encouragement to him at this hardest moment in his life, because of their own human desires, but Elijah and Moses could.

How do the three disciples respond to this? Look at verses 5,6. First we notice how frightened they are. They’re frightened because of the majestic glory of Jesus, as well as the presence of Elijah and Moses. It’s so powerful that even Peter who likes to speak up doesn’t know what to say. What he *does* say seems strange. Why put up three shelters? It seems he’s trying to serve them. But what he’s really expressing is his desire to preserve this moment of glory on the mountain. The three shelters represent his desire to stay there and avoid the suffering that awaited them down in reality. We’re really no different from Peter. We’d all like to have instant glory and avoid suffering.

What happens next? Read verse 7. The cloud represents God’s own presence. These three men had been hearing Jesus but not really listening. God himself had to yell at them. It shows how stubborn their fixed ideas are, and how much they don’t want to hear about the way of the cross. It’s still so hard to listen to Jesus about the way of the cross. But like it or not, we all need to listen to Jesus seriously, because his words are the words of God’s own Son. Look at verse 8. Elijah and Moses disappear. Only Jesus remains. Again it emphasizes the importance of Jesus. How easy to get distracted thinking about people! How easy to get attached to people other than Jesus! We try to hold onto so many people who are important to us. But in the end, we all find that only Jesus remains to each of us.

Read verses 9,10. Jesus knows that if word gets out that he’s been with Elijah and Moses in glory, the Jews would never allow him to go to the cross—they’d revolt. We also see here that the disciples are still trying to process what Jesus meant. They can’t imagine he’s talking about literally being killed and rising from the dead, so they’re just trying to find a symbolic meaning in it.

Look at verse 11. They’re still thinking about Elijah. The Old Testament ends with a prophecy that Elijah would come back to earth just before the coming of the messianic age. So the disciples are wondering that since Elijah had just appeared, the time of glory should be quickly following, right? How does Jesus answer? Read verses 12,13. Here, the Elijah Jesus is talking about is John the Baptist. Even though he fulfilled the prophecy about Elijah, John the Baptist was put in prison, then beheaded. In the same way, Jesus would fulfill the prophecy about the Messiah, but suffer much and be rejected. Jesus is emphasizing again that much suffering and rejection is God’s way; it can’t be avoided.

Let’s read verses 2b,3 again. This is Jesus’ glory. But it was not just a freak revelation a long time ago. It’s something that every Christian can still experience today. How can we experience Jesus’ glory? 2 Peter 1:19 says, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” As we pay attention to the word of God and really meditate on it, it says the morning star will rise in our hearts. The morning star appears after a long, dark, scary night. It helps sailors get their bearings and find their direction. In the same way, when we meditate on the word of God and begin to see the glory of Jesus, we regain our spiritual direction. The Bible encourages us all to “contemplate the Lord’s glory” (2Co3:18). When we do, it promises that we’re gradually transformed (in Greek, it’s the same word “transfigured”--metamorphosized) into the image of Jesus.

So as we heard at the beginning of this study, “What are you looking at?” In your private moments are you looking at yourself too much in the mirror? Is it TV? Is it people? The more we think about fallen people, the more discouraged we get. But the more we contemplate the glory of Jesus, the more we can embrace the cross of suffering he gives us. The more we see the glory of Jesus, we can say like Apostle Paul, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Ro8:18). May God help us look at the glory of Jesus until we can deeply accept the way of the cross.