

Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister¹
RUF Bible Study – The Gospel According to Peter
Sept. 27, 2006
Transfigured – Mark 9:2-10

2-4 Six days later, three of them did see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

5-6 Peter interrupted, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials— one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

7 Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him."

8 The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

9-10 Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. "Don't tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you're free to talk." They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth "rising from the dead" meant.

11 Meanwhile they were asking, "Why do the religion scholars say that Elijah has to come first?"

12-13 Jesus replied, "Elijah does come first and get everything ready for the coming of the Son of Man. They treated this Elijah like dirt, much like they will treat the Son of Man, who will, according to Scripture, suffer terribly and be kicked around contemptibly."

Do you remember in The Lord of the Rings when Frodo meets Strider? There is a certain level of uneasiness about this man. He seems shady, suspect. Can we trust him?²

On Peter's journey of faith, we often see him wondering the same thing about his friend Jesus. And then he gets a little better picture. A little more clarity.

In this passage he gets a lot of it.

Right before Mark 9 we have, yes, Mark 8. In Mark 8, we read of Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Trumpets go off when he says this. It's tremendous. Jesus says that upon Peter and his confession he will build his church. Hooray.

Then the worst thing happens. Peter keeps talking and says that Jesus shouldn't have to die on the cross, he shouldn't have to die at all. Jesus rebukes Peter at this point, to the extent that he calls him Satan. Scary music in the background.

Real Life

And I want you to know what happened in the rest of chapter 9. Because this is where we live our life almost all of the time. After our passage on the transfiguration, they come down from the mountain to a mess, to a mob scene. Jesus and the disciples are there. The religious scholars are there. Everyone is confused and arguing. The center of attention is a man with his son. And his son is demon-possessed. Whoa. What would that be like? I've seen "The Exorcist" and I'm not a fan of demonic activity at all.

It's a crazy scene, and a dramatic one. The boy's father comes to Jesus and asks for help, and we get this important exchange: "*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*" *23 And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes."* *24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"*

The man gives Jesus his son, puts in Jesus' arms his most precious possession. What happens next? Jesus kicks out the demon and the boy... looks like he's dying. Not good. But wait, the boy is healed and stands up!

¹ © Doug Serven, 2006 You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 500 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Doug Serven. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2006, website: "<http://www.ouruf.org>"

www.ouruf.org.
For this series, I used commentaries all throughout the gospels. I also used as my base text Michael Card's book, *The Fragile Stone*. I consulted sermons by Rev. Tim Keller found out www.redeemer.com in many instances. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² I tried to think of other examples of this big "reveal": Napoleon Dynamite is a "great" dancer, Bruce Willis is actually a dead person in *The Sixth Sense*, Darth Vader is Luke's father. But those just weren't as good.

Very good. Jesus explains that the reason the disciples weren't able to heal the boy was because they didn't pray. And then Jesus talks about dying again. In the Message, Eugene Peterson puts their reaction to more of this talk like this: *They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it.*

So what do we have here? We have doubt. The father doubted, and admitted it. We have ineffectiveness. The disciples weren't able to do something. We have prayerlessness. We have confusion – what exactly is one supposed to do with a demon, anyway. We have fear. The disciples were afraid of Jesus. We have misunderstanding or nonunderstanding. What is Jesus talking about? We have trouble. This man's son is in trouble.

In other words, we have life. Life is filled with this sort of trouble, isn't it. Doubt. Ineffectiveness. Prayerlessness. Confusion. Fear. Misunderstanding. Trouble. That sounds like our lives much of the time.

What do you do when you have these things, things we all have? Can you ever relate to this sort of feeling. Things not going right? Death around us. Frustration. Entropy. Our schedules being interrupted. Our hopes going awry. We may not quite call those things demonic, but what do we call them?

We hate losing control, don't we? And having a demon around may be the epitome for lack of control. What do you do when you feel like you're losing control of your life, your relationships, your grades, your faith?

What keeps you from despair? What keeps you going when things are broken all around you? I know you think about these things, but do we talk about them or try to push them away?

We made one stab at answering that question with our last passage and we make another one here. It's my contention that what happened on the mountain helps us too.

The Mountain

Let's step back a second and think about what happened on the mountain. In 9:1 Jesus had said, "*Some of you who are standing here are going to see it happen, see the kingdom of God arrive in full force.*" Well, guess what, here it is – the Kingdom of God in full force, and they only had to wait six days to see it.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to the mountain with him, but we only hear from Peter in this event. This is again reminiscent of Moses, something of a connection that the gospels take great pains to make for us. Moses went up to the mountain, heard God speak from the clouds, asked to see him but was told that he would die if he saw him full on. So he saw only a glimpse, and when he came down, his face glowed from the radiance of the glory of God. And let's add that when he came back down, he entered confusion, pain and lost-ness just like we see here in Mark 9.

So is this another Moses experience?

No. Though similar, its differences are striking. Jesus isn't transformed, he's transfigured. This means he is shown to be who he really is. And the image is whiteness, so white that the strongest bleach couldn't make anything any whiter. Brilliant white. Eye popping white. But while Moses reflected the light, the light comes from Jesus. Moses would be like the moon, while Jesus is the sun.

And we have the cloud on the mountain again, and we hear God's voice again, saying, "*This is my Son, marked by my love. Listen to him.*"

It's a wow moment, and shows us the Jesus is the object of our worship. He supercedes Moses and Elijah³; the law and the prophets all pointed to him. Moses had said in Deuteronomy 18:15: "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers.*" And he is here. He is God's Son, authenticated yet again in a powerful way. The disciples are to listen to him, because up to this point they had been fairly bad listeners. They don't ever really get it until after the resurrection, but this is a big step for them.

This is another Who Am I? moment for Jesus, so they and we can realize who he is. He is the Son of God. In Colossians 1:15, we read about Jesus: *He is the image of the invisible God.*

Think about that for a minute. You've heard that before. But let it sink in. When you see Jesus, you see God. Do you realize that if Jesus thinks he's a good teacher *and* that he is God, then that is not the definition of a good teacher. Don't you have arrogant teachers? Haven't you had deluded professors? Don't you know people who think they are really special and privileged and they're actually not? What do you think of those people? And then imagine if one of them told you that he was God. If Jesus isn't God, then he is not to be trusted or followed.

But if he is, then you should orient your whole life around that fact because it is truly amazing. But not only is he the object of worship for you if you believe this really happened and is true, this passage shows us something else.

As Tim Keller puts it, Jesus is also the secret of worship. You see, if you read the Bible straight through, you would notice something – when people came into the presence of God, they expected to die. It was just too much. Now this is true for all religions, and why all religions have priests and temples. There is something about God that has to be mediated, that is too much for us to see and understand.

And that's what Peter is thinking about when he blurts out his question about building the tents, which is really a way to say tabernacles. We know what tents are, but tabernacles are a little more of a mystery. A tabernacle is a... tent. Just a big tent used for religious purposes; it's a portable temple. And Moses – back to Moses – built the tabernacle. You can read about it in one of the books of the Old Testament you tend to skip over but shouldn't.

³ How did they know it was Moses and Elijah? We figured it was the MOSES belt buckle.

Peter is saying two things – one is that this is awesome and they want to stay awhile. I mean Moses is here and Elijah and Jesus and God and me and my buddies. Let's keep this going. In fact, why go back down at all. This must be it. The Kingdom of God has come! And we're here in the middle of it.

And, strangely at the same time, he's thinking that he needs some sort of shield, a tabernacle, because he can't take too much of the directness of God's presence.

But, that's just it. He can. Jesus is the secret of worship. Because of Jesus, they are not consumed. Because of Jesus, they hear God's voice. They see Jesus, they see God, and they do not die. They hear the gospel, the love of the Father for the Son. It is a glorious moment for them. Because of Jesus.

Because of Jesus, you can enter in to worship God. And this is different from knowing about God. Peter had known about God, he had confessed that Jesus was God's son already in the previous chapter. But now he was seeing, sensing, hearing it. The cloud. The voice. The radiant brightness. The experience. Knowing about and experiencing aren't the same thing.

Do you ever worship God? Do you ever sense Jesus? Do you ever hear God, know that he is there? Do you ever worship? There is a sense of the awesome holiness of God, the beauty of his love for his son and his son for his father, of the goodness of God to spare his church – do you ever experience that? Does that change you?

Real Life

So we have the quintessential mountain top experience. Even as they're up there, we have clues that something is amiss. Moses, Elijah and Jesus are having a conversation about Jesus' ministry, his exodus in leading his people out of sin and bondage. And then Jesus tells them to not talk about what they'd seen until after the resurrection. Wait a minute, they're thinking. Resurrection cannot happen unless Oh great, more death talk from Jesus.

And even in his answer to Peter about Elijah, he implies suffering lies ahead. *They treated this Elijah like dirt, much like they will treat the Son of Man, who will, according to Scripture, suffer terribly and be kicked around contemptibly.*" What did they do to the new Elijah, whom he has said was John the Baptist? They killed him. So what is going to happen to the Son of Man? Yep. Death too.

It's all the time with him, isn't it? Jesus comes from glory and talks about the cross. The two are not separated for him. He is all about the cross all the time. And for him, they are not separated at all. For us, for Peter and the disciples, there is glory on the mountain and the journey to the cross of shame. Those are mutually exclusive. Not so for Jesus. He says they go together.

And so he goes back into the world of suffering. He doesn't stay on the mountain in worship, but he touches the real world and its problems. He enters the confusion, the pain and the fear.

And - pow – he's immediately challenged by the Pharisees, the disciples, the demon and this boy's father.

Let's look again and see what happens and how it can apply to us. There is one person in this story who gets what he wants and it is the father of the boy. He comes to Jesus and says what? I need your help. I believe. Help my unbelief.

This is an important conversation in the Bible. It's important because this man got access to Jesus, didn't he. In the midst of his pain, he cried out to Jesus, and he didn't cry out a doctrinal statement, nor of his holiness, nor of his goodness – he cried out of his helplessness. ⁴ He says, I'm not faithful – help me! It is helplessness, not holiness, that gets you access to Jesus

This is not normal in religion. Most religions have a different transaction that occurs. They say that we give God our good record, our good lives, our good doctrine and then we receive God's blessing. But Christianity says that God gives you a good record, and then because we're grateful to him for his grace to us, we give back to him blessing. That is a switch, isn't it. Notice that this man is only giving to Jesus his need. Nothing else. He thinks Jesus can help.

And Jesus isn't flustered with that. He doesn't say, Well come back to me after you study for awhile. Come back when you can rightly assess who I am. No, he says nothing but takes the boy into his arm.

Notice that the man hands over his child to Jesus. His most precious possession he gives to this man he's just met. And it looks like Jesus isn't helping at all. It looks like the boy is dead.

Isn't that the way it is a lot of times? It seems like when we follow Jesus we do worse instead of better? That being a Christian only hurts us, never heals us? Sometimes we have a rather long delay before we see anything other than that way of thinking. We have to move. We have to wait. We have to take the hit. We have to give something up. And we wonder, is this working?

Now in our story it was only a few minutes. The boy wasn't dead, and he came to life and everyone immediately saw that the appearance of death was wrong. But for us it could be longer.

Can you give your most precious resources to Jesus and trust him? Will you pull them back when it looks like he's killing them? Or will you hang in there and really give them, really trust them? Your time. Your talent. Your career. Your sex life. Your money. Your heart. Your marital status. Do you think he'll harm you?

Let me ask you, who do you think was the small group of people who most believed that Jesus wouldn't fail in this situation? Who do you think knew the best that he would come through?

⁴ From Tim Keller's sermon on this, as are many of the thoughts that follow, though told in my own way.

I submit it was Peter, James and John. Because they had seen Jesus in worship, they were able to best trust him as he walked toward death, dealt with hurt and suffering.

You see, on the mountain, Jesus was surrounded by brilliant light, clothed in radiance, immersed in a cloud of God's presence, and the affirmation of God's words, You are my beloved Son.

But on the cross, Jesus was left in the dark, abandoned by God, left naked and ashamed, and he cried out not to a loving Father, but My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

You have to see that Jesus lost so you can win, that he gave up the loving embrace of the Father so that you could have it. That is the kind of God you worship, and that kind of God is the only hope you have in making sense of the rest of life off the mountain. The worship on the mountain, these glimpses of Jesus, are episodic. They don't occur all the time. We come down and live life in the confusion. But they are prominent, they are formative, they are essential in how we make sense of the rest of life. We have to have them. We must worship. We must see Jesus. We must experience him in order to make it the rest of the time.

At the very end of the Lord of the Rings trilogy, we have the glorious scene where we see King Aragorn in all his splendor with the crowd around him cheering and all the people he loves and serves bowing before him.

We will have that too someday. There will be a time when we see Jesus in all his glory, when we shall crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon the throne, and there will be no other anthem except his alone.

But it isn't here yet. There is cross before us too, as followers of Jesus.

Aragorn showed himself a few times along the way. He held the broken sword. He had it reforged. He proved himself strong, brave, faithful, kind, wise – he proved himself in those glimpses as someone worthy to be followed.

Without this sort of Jesus in your life you won't become wise or compassionate in your trials. You will become bitter, cynical and angry.

But if we come to him with our selflessness, if we take our fingers off of our precious possessions and give them to Jesus to see what he can do no matter what it looks like he is doing, if we can see that he is the object and secret of our worship, then... then we will be changed in our hurts.

Peter remembered this moment for the rest of his life, and why wouldn't he? He wrote in 1 Peter 1:17-18: *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.*

That day changed him as he saw Jesus continue his ministry to hurting people in a hurting world, as he watched his friend go from the glory to a greater glory, the cross.