

“3, 2, 1”
Mark 9:2-9
February 14, 2021

I'm going to begin my message this morning with a confession. I have a hard time remembering what I preach, let alone what others preach. Fortunately, or maybe it's unfortunately, Joan has an excellent memory when it comes to what she hears in sermons, especially mine. So when I say or do something that is inconsistent with something I've said in a sermon, I can count on her to say, "But in your sermon you said..." However, many years ago Joan and I had the privilege of worshipping in a small house church in Nepal at a time in that country when a person could be jailed for becoming a Christian. Some of the members of the congregation were in prison and the offering that day was going to provide support for their families while they were incarcerated for their faith.

The pastor of the congregation was out of town. He and an elder had gone to some out-of-the-way place to baptize a new convert. If the pastor had been caught and arrested he would have faced seven years in prison. But since he was not available to preach at the service a young Nepali member had been asked to bring God's Word to the congregation. He had no seminary education, may not have had much education at all, but the Holy Spirit had obviously given him the gift of preaching. His text was Mark 9:2-9, the Transfiguration. And I'll never forget the outline of his message: "The Privilege of the Three, the Testimony of the Two, and the Preeminence of the One." My content may be a little different from his, but that outline describes the Transfiguration in a nutshell.

So, I begin with the privilege of the three: Peter, James and John. Out of all His followers the Lord has chosen twelve and designated them "Apostles." They travel with Him and He shares with them the deeper meanings of His stories and the events which are taking place. But from the Twelve the Son of God has chosen three to share with Him the most intimate moments and experiences of His earthly ministry. He takes them with Him up on the Mount of Transfiguration and they are nearest to Him as He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. Why Jesus chooses Peter and James and John is a matter of speculation, though we do know that He intended Peter to serve as spokesperson for the early Church, and that James and John were probably His relatives and had been part of His extended family for years.

What these three Apostles are privilege to observe is what has come to be known as “the Transfiguration.” In Luke’s Gospel we learn that Jesus has gone up on the mountain to spend time in prayer. And the answer to that prayer is what transpires on the mountain. The person of the Son of God is clothed with that eternal glory which had always been His as God the Son. The Greek word describing that is the one from which we get our word metamorphosis. And then Moses and Elijah are sent to speak with Him about the experiences which await Him in Jerusalem, what they describe as His ‘exodus.’ And while the six of them are enveloped in that cloud which in Scripture represents the presence of God, Jesus hears His Father say, not to Him, but to the three Apostles, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him.”

I believe that Peter and John are privileged to be a part of that experience because of the role they are to play in the writing of God’s Word. Both of them write, Peter in his Second Letter, and John in the prologue to his Gospel, of the eternal glory of the Second Person of the Trinity, to which they have been eyewitnesses. At a time when the Church was threatened by heresies denying that Jesus was fully God and fully human, Peter writes, “We were witnesses to His majesty...when He received honor and glory from God the Father.” And John affirms, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” And perhaps James, as the first Apostle to be martyred, is privileged to see Jesus in His heavenly glory to prepare him for his death.

Now we turn to the testimony of the two, Moses and Elijah. They represent two of the most impressive figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses provided the people of Israel with the first five books of the Bible, which chronicle the unfolding drama of God’s plan to save a sinful world. They begin with the Garden of Eden and conclude with God’s people standing at the edge of the Promised Land, with Moses himself leading them to freedom in the exodus. Elijah is the formidable prophet who confronts wicked King Ahab, and his even more wicked wife, Jezebel who have led God’s people into idolatry. Elijah, who never died, was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, and represents all those powerful Spirit-inspired prophets who spoke and wrote of the fulfillment of God’s plan in the One who was to come.

So why are they sent? They come in answer to the Savior's prayer. It is helpful to put the Transfiguration into its Gospel context. Only a week earlier Jesus had asked His closest followers who they thought He was. Peter had responded, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." In response, the Lord begins to share with them what awaits Him in the city of Jerusalem: His rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. Peter rebukes him, and the Lord rebukes Peter. Then the Lord calls the crowd to Himself and spells out the nature of discipleship, calling for self-denial, cross-bearing, and the willingness to lose one's life for His sake. The Son of God is not asking of His followers what He is not expecting for Himself, though at a cost far higher than they can ever imagine. In anticipation of what lies ahead, He turns to His heavenly Father for assurance and guidance.

Moses and Elijah have been sent from heaven to assure the Son of God that He has rightly discerned the will of His Father, and that His obedience to that will guarantees that the plan of salvation, put in place before the world began, will find its fulfillment in His suffering and death and resurrection. In Luke's telling of this event he writes that Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about His coming departure which He will accomplish in Jerusalem. And the Greek word Luke uses is 'exodus.' The exodus stands for the redemption and release of God's people from slavery, and it begins with the death of the Passover Lamb, the substitute whose death saved the lives of the first-born sons of the Israelites. Jesus, in His coming passion and death and resurrection will redeem a lost and dying world.

The coming of Moses and Elijah from their home in heaven must have also brought to the Lord's remembrance the glory and honor, the worship and praise, which had been His from all eternity as God the Son. And the transformation which takes place, the metamorphosis from the mundane to the glorious, must have been for Jesus, as He thinks of the cross He must endure, and the shame it brings with it, a foretaste of the joy which will be His in the end. For He is the obedient Son of His Father and He delights to do His will. Beyond the cross is the joy which awaits Him on His return to the right hand of His Father in heaven. And having heard the testimony of the two, that all that has been written in the Law and Prophets bears witness to Him, Jesus hears His Father say of Him, the Incarnate Word, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him."

And so we come to Jesus and the pre-eminence of the One. At the heart of the Transfiguration is the physical witness to an incomprehensible theological truth that Jesus of Nazareth is God Incarnate. He is not only the Son of God, He is equally God the Son. In the Transfiguration heaven and earth, time and eternity coalesce for a brief moment. The Son of God in all His humanity is seen, for just a brief time and by three privileged followers, in all His glory, as God the Son. The Christian faith rests on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only Person who ever was and ever will be fully human and fully divine. As such He is the pre-eminent expression of what all human beings were created to be like. And at the same time He is the pre-eminent expression of who God is, the radiance of His glory and the express image of His being. Nothing and no one can compare to Him.

The Transfiguration reminds us that it came in answer to prayer as Jesus set His face for Jerusalem and the suffering and death which await Him there. He comes to Jerusalem as our perfect Representative. He comes in perfect obedience to lay down His life as a Substitute for us. He will take upon Himself the responsibility for our rebellion and disobedience and embrace the punishment of the cross to atone for our sins, to bring us pardon and peace with a holy God. There is nowhere else for us to turn, no one else to whom we can look, in order to find the forgiveness we know we need, the hope and new beginning we desperately long for. When it comes to our salvation, Jesus Christ is always the Preeminent One. For no one loves us as He does, and no one else will ever be able to do what He has done for us.

And there is no one else who will deserve our allegiance and loyalty as He does. He is preeminently the one who has every right to claim lordship over our lives. He loves each of us with a love far beyond our deserving. He loves us in spite of all the things we have said or done that make us not love ourselves. And God's Word reminds us that we are not our own, we don't belong to ourselves. Jesus bought us. He redeemed us, by shedding His blood on the cross to pay the debt we owe to the justice and holiness of God. 'Lord' is not an honorific title when it comes to Jesus. He intends it to be the reality of our lives as we surrender our hearts and minds and wills to His lordship. And no one is more worthy of our devotion and love and obedience than the Preeminent One, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and God the Son.

The Season of Lent begins this week on the seventeenth, Ash Wednesday. As we begin the six weeks which will take us to Good Friday and on to Easter, there is one thing I hope we will take with us from the account of our Lord's Transfiguration. We weren't privileged to be on the mountain with Peter and James and John. We weren't privy to the discussion with Moses and Elijah. But the one thing which we do share with them is that word from God the Father, "This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him." And He is saying to us as we enter the Lenten Season what He said to the crowd before He went up on the mountain to pray. Listen to Him: "Those who would come after Me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me." May that be our privilege and our testimony in the days ahead. Amen.