

THIS IS MY BELOVED SON; LISTEN TO HIM
Mark 9:2-9; Epiphany Transfiguration B; February 11, 2024

And a cloud overshadowed [Peter, James, and John], and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son; listen to Him.”

[GREETING]

When was the last time that God spoke to you directly from a bright cloud overshadowing you? My guess is never. I’ve never had that experience. Biblical examples of God revealing Himself and speaking directly to people are quite rare, except for some Old Testament prophets. God spoke directly to Moses on Mount Sinai, revealing Himself and His personal name, *Yahweh*/the LORD, and calling Moses to lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt. God led them back to that mountain by a pillar of cloud by day a pillar of fire by night. There He revealed His covenant Law before leading them on to the Promised Land.

New Testament examples of God the Father speaking directly to people are also rare. God the Father declared Jesus His beloved Son at His Baptism and again on the Mount of Transfiguration. Shortly before Jesus’ suffering and death, after Jesus prayed that His Father’s name be glorified in His suffering and death, the Father’s voice came from heaven **“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again,”** and it sounded like thunder to those who heard it (Jn 12:28-29).

Imagine that you were with Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. You have just seen Jesus in glory with Moses and Elijah, and not knowing what to make of it, you were terrified. And when the cloud overshadowed you – knowing that this was no ordinary cloud but the cloud of God’s presence that once led Israel during the Exodus as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the same cloud of God’s glory and presence that filled the tabernacle and, later, the Temple in Jerusalem – from that cloud came God the Father’s voice speaking to you: **This is My beloved Son; listen to Him.** What would you do? It might be a good idea to listen to what Jesus is about to tell you.

And suddenly, looking around, [the disciples] no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, He charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. “What! We just saw the most amazing thing, and we aren’t allowed to tell anyone about it? We’re going to be with the rest of the Twelve and they are going to ask us what we were doing with Jesus, and we can’t say anything? Why not?” What was behind Jesus’ command to not let this out yet?

Immediately before the Transfiguration, St. Mark records Jesus’ question to His disciples about who He was and Peter’s wonderful confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ. But when Jesus then told them **plainly** that He was about to go to Jerusalem to be rejected, killed, and then rise on the third day, Peter rebuked Jesus and got called “Satan” for totally misunderstanding Jesus and what He came to accomplish. Peter and the others who witnessed the Transfiguration were not ready to tell anyone about what they saw until Jesus had risen from the dead. Only after Jesus rose would they understand and be able to preach correctly what had happened.

The Gospels depict Jesus’ disciples as the real people they were, with the same sorts of faults and weaknesses that all of us have. Peter thought there was some advantage staying on the Mount of Transfiguration. James and John would later seek to turn their close relationship with Jesus into positions of power in Jesus’ kingdom. They – and we – struggle with how Jesus establishes a kingdom for us by His suffering and death.

After Peter was rebuked for rebuking Jesus for saying He needed to die and rise, Jesus went on to say that all of us as Christians need to **deny ourselves and take our crosses and follow Him** (8:34-35). Those are words that often turn off people to being Christians. We would much rather that Jesus would keep us from any suffering or dying, not have to suffer for being Christians, but that our lives be easy and without pain. I don’t like suffering and neither do you. Even when my suffering is my fault because of my sinfulness and the bad choices I make, I don’t like suffering the consequences and would like God to free me from responsibility. I would like my life to stay easy and trouble free, but that is not reality for sinners in a sinful world.

Peter rebuked Jesus for saying He needed to suffer and die before rising on the third day. Peter believed in Jesus as God's Christ, but thought salvation from sin and death should not come by God's Son suffering and dying. Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration was all for staying up there in the glory of God and not for going down the mountain where there would be suffering and death for Jesus and for himself. The problem with Peter's plan of staying on the mountain is that no one gets saved by it. If we think living as Christians will be pain-free, suffering-free, death-free, we want a different Savior than Jesus came to be for us.

Something that used to be a prominent aspect of Christian piety, something that we might ignore or even deny these days, is what Luther reminds us we pray for in the Seventh Petition, **But deliver us from evil.** "*What does this mean?* We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven."

What are we asking God when we pray for a "blessed end"? It's not that we have an easy, long life free from suffering and a painless death. God might choose to grant us such things in His mercy, but we have been warned that this life is full of trouble ending in death. Therefore, Christians should be prepared in faith for the end of our lives on this earth. Our prayer is for true faith in God, who in mercy forgives our sins. We pray for God's strength in the midst of our weaknesses and failures. We pray for God's life in Christ in the face of our impending deaths. And when death comes, we are ready and face it in faith because Jesus has already died for our sins and risen to declare us righteous before His Father in heaven.

All indications are that Peter, James, and John listened to Jesus coming down the Mount of Transfiguration and did not tell anyone what he had seen on the mountain until after Jesus had risen from the dead. But after Jesus rose, they did not stop telling others what they had seen and heard from God the Father. **This is My beloved Son; listen to Him.**

The Church is about to enter the season of Lent, the forty days before Easter, not counting Sundays, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Life is not about staying up on the mountain with Jesus in His glory but living in the real world where Jesus died for sinners and rose from the dead on the third day. The beloved Son of God, for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven and became man to suffer, die, and rise for sinful people. This is our faith; this is our only hope, if we are going to receive from God a “blessed end.”

When Jesus took the three disciples up on that mountain, it was something they would never forget and would tell others about later. The heavenly glory Jesus had on the Transfiguration Mount would be traded soon for the glory of suffering and dying on a hill outside Jerusalem’s walls, but what the disciples had seen in Jesus could not be unseen. The vision of Jesus appearing in glory with two Old Testaments saints followed by Jesus’ promise to rise from the dead would encourage them as they would later face struggles and even death for faith in Jesus. His Transfiguration gives us the same encouragement in this “vale of tears-valley of sorrow” we are currently in.

The life we have now is one of walking with Jesus down the mountain into the valley of the shadow of death, but we do that knowing what is coming. The Son of Man, Jesus, has risen from the dead, and we too will rise from the dead. By our baptisms into Christ, God has declared us His beloved sons and daughters through faith in Jesus and has commanded us to listen to what He says about His death and resurrection. The heavenly glory of Jesus that was seen on the mountaintop is what awaits us.

Heavenly Father, when our last hour comes, for Jesus’ sake give us a blessed end and graciously take us from the valley of sorrow to Yourself in heaven. Amen.