

## Transfiguration Sunday, February 14<sup>th</sup> 2021

### Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. *You must listen to him.* <sup>16</sup> For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." <sup>17</sup> The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. <sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, *and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.* <sup>19</sup> I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.

### Mark 9:2-10 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. <sup>3</sup> His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup> (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

## Sermon: The View From Here

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, this coming week we will be moving into Lent. Recall that “Epiphany” means “revelation,” something that is hidden is being revealed, a divine secret is being made plain. The season begins with the visit of the wise men from the East, where Jesus is unveiled as the light for the whole world and not just for the Jews.<sup>1</sup> It then moves on to the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus is disclosed as the beloved Son of God, who is then filled with the divine Spirit and authorized for ministry.<sup>2</sup> Last week we considered one such example, where Jesus – the Son of Man – is authorized to forgive sin, as well as to teach and heal.<sup>3</sup> The season ends with the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus,<sup>4</sup> where we get a brief glimpse of the Jesus in glory – a foretaste of what is to come, as well as being an affirmation of his ministry and person, since the focus now turns toward the events of Easter week.

Let’s be honest and admit that we struggle to comprehend such an unusual passage today. This strange episode may simply seem to us modern readers to be a bizarre, other-worldly experience for Peter, James and John. It is shrouded in mystery; mystical experiences can do that. But we should not simply dismiss Mark’s message on that account. An obvious way for us to enter into this text is to consider the divine voice from heaven that proclaims, “*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*”<sup>5</sup> This reiterates the divine affirmation that God gave to Jesus at his baptism, which we heard about a few weeks ago. According to Mark, on that on that occasion, the voice from heaven was *only* heard by Jesus. In today’s unexpected encounter, those words are directed to Peter, James, and John – the inner circle of disciples, and who serve as *reliable witnesses* to the wider church of this special event.<sup>6</sup>

Up until now, the *true* identity of Jesus, as Mark portrays it, has been an *implicit* secret – only known to Jesus himself. That being said, remember that Mark’s opening verse to his *readers* announces the true identity of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, something Mark affirms because of the fact of the risen Christ.<sup>7</sup> But, we must wait patiently for Mark’s narrative to unfold as we continue our journey with the disciples. Here, in the Transfiguration, Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is *explicitly* revealed, but only to these three disciples who are then strictly told *not* to tell anyone about this experience until “after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”<sup>8</sup> Although the three disciples are naturally afraid to be in

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/A-New-Beginning-A-New-Hope.pdf> .

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/By-Water-and-the-Spirit.pdf> .

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Whole-Bodied-Salvation.pdf> .

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9:2-10; Matt 17:1-9; Luke 9:28-36.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:7; Matt 17:5; Luke 9:35. The mention of “cloud” signifies the very presence of God; see, Exod 24:15-18; Isa 4:5; Ezek 1:4.

<sup>6</sup> See also 2 Pet 1:16-21; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Jesus-as-Messianic-King.pdf> .

<sup>7</sup> See also Peter’s declaration that Jesus is *the Messiah* just prior to the Transfiguration (Mark 8:27-30).

<sup>8</sup> Mark 9:9-10. This follows on from Jesus predicting his death (Mark 8:31-32), which Jesus repeats twice more after the Transfiguration (Mark 9:30-32; 10:32-34).

the presence of such holiness, and puzzled as to what those words might mean. In Jewish thought at the time, the resurrection would happen to *all* the righteous *at the end of time*, not to *one* person ahead of all the others. While Mark's readers would *already know* about the resurrection of Jesus, these characters in the story certainly *didn't*, and *they clearly weren't expecting it*. We know – like all Mark's readers – that they will be able to make better sense of it *after* the resurrection.

To understand the transfiguration in *literary* context, we need to appreciate what this story would have meant to Jews and Greeks at that time. First, the language is rooted in Greek traditions about gods walking the Earth in human form and manifesting their divine glory or radiance. This Greek notion is adapted to Hebrew accounts of “theophany,” where God vividly reveals himself in the Old Testament. One such example occurred when Moses went up Mount Sinai, which was covered in a cloud - symbolizing *the presence of God*. When Moses later appeared out of the cloud, his face shone brightly and the Israelites were afraid to come near him, and he had to cover his face with a veil.<sup>9</sup> The Old Testament writers knew that God's presence was *not* uniform, but could occur with heightened intensity on rare, special occasions. In such occurrences, whether they were in a burning bush, or in a cloud, or in a whirlwind, or in a still small voice, the divine presence was not fleeting, but intense and profound. Consider too the vision of Jacob's ladder, when the veil of the ordinariness that normally prevents us from seeing God at work is drawn back, and a fuller reality of what God is going in the world is disclosed.<sup>10</sup> This is the literary context of this today's dramatic epiphany.

So what *was* the inner reality being revealed here? The connection with Moses and Elijah reveals that Jesus is completing the tasks begun by the great lawgiver, Moses, and Israel's great prophet, Elijah. Moses and Elijah were vital in preparing the way, Jesus is finishing the job. It also reveals that Jesus is *not* Moses or Elijah, but he *is* worthy of being in such exalted company. Incidentally Elijah was thought never to have died, and was taken directly to heaven in a chariot of fire.<sup>11</sup> There were also Jewish legends at the time that claimed Moses himself never died in the wilderness, since the location of his tomb was unknown.<sup>12</sup> Since these two people, along with Enoch, were considered to live in the presence of God, this transformation of Jesus that the disciples witnessed should have permitted them, upon later reflection, to glimpse what the resurrection entails. But for the moment, this is primarily an affirmation that Jesus is indeed the anointed Son of God, the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> The divine voice from the cloud concludes with, “*Listen to him!*” – says, which on the face of it means, “*Believe* in Jesus' message and continue to *learn* from him.” Yet this also echoes Deuteronomy 18:15, from our Old Testament reading, where we read the words of Moses himself, who said: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet

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<sup>9</sup> Exod 24: 15-18; 34:29-35.

<sup>10</sup> See also John 1:51 in this regard.

<sup>11</sup> See 2 Kings 2:1-15. This also differentiates the Elijah-figure, John the Baptist, from the original Elijah; see: Mal 4:5; 3:1; Mark 1:2-3, 6; 9:11-13; Matt 17:12-13.

<sup>12</sup> See Deut 34:6.

<sup>13</sup> We must understand this in terms of Jesus being Messiah, rather than him being divine, in a later Trinitarian sense.

like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. *You must listen to him.*"<sup>14</sup> Moses' presence in that moment of Transfiguration clearly underlines this message. But there is more than just a connection with the past figures of Moses and Elijah. There is also an allusion to the future coming of the Son of Man in all his glory, when he comes to judge the nations.<sup>15</sup> This is signified in the bright clothes that Jesus wears and further indicates that Jesus himself belongs in the divine domain. So while Mark's language uses Old Testament imagery, the vision of Jesus in glory is also a glimpse *into the* [eschatological] *future*.

Let's pause on this mountain top for a short while. When the disciples see a dazzling Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, Peter blurts out, "Rabbi, this is amazing, let's rig up some dwellings and all *stay* in this moment!"<sup>16</sup> Have you had an experience like this, one that that you wanted to grasp and to never end? I don't mean a dramatic moment of spiritual importance quite like this one, but profound and unforgettable nevertheless. I recall that having been successfully interviewed for my first permanent job as a professor in England,<sup>17</sup> a stressful moment to be sure, that as I was travelling onwards by train, I saw a vivid rainbow through the window that filled me with a deep sense of peace, and it was an intense reminder that God was with me on this academic journey.<sup>18</sup> I hope you have had similar profound moments of your own, perhaps holding your new-born child, or grand-child, for the first time and experiencing the miracle of life. Or when you received an important promotion or an award and you saw a clear view of where your career was heading. It's Valentine's Day today, so maybe you are reflecting on that special moment when you knew this one was "The One!" We may wish, like Peter, that we could live *in* that heightened moment, but we all know that we must come down from the high mountain and face the daily reality of hard work in a that new job or promotion, or in raising a child, or in building and maintaining a loving relationship. I will talk more about that next week. But for today, and without dwelling on the past, it is good to *remind* ourselves of those special mountain-top moments because they can be times of unexpected clarity, a vision or a glimpse of one possible "future,"<sup>19</sup> or a

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<sup>14</sup> Given Mark 8:31-32, this "listen to him" also means that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection are integral to the messianic mission. And that way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him, as the disciples would later discover for themselves. Even the affirmations of exaltation and entry into the "glory of the Father" in Mark 8:38 cannot nullify the unthinkable *scandal* of the cross.

<sup>15</sup> The notion of Jesus as the divinely-appointed (eschatological) judge is evidenced in, for example, Mark 8:38; 14:62; Matt 7:21-23; 16:27; 25; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1, 8. (See also See Dan 7:14.)

<sup>16</sup> Mark 9:5. Mark's commentary in the next verse suggests Peter's comment was out of "fear." Note, in Greek tradition it was customary to build a shrine at the site of an epiphany of a deity; this also occurred in the Old Testament, e.g., Gen 12:8; 28:18-22.

<sup>17</sup> Technically, a "Lecturer" (and at University of Newcastle in England), and where – over time – I was promoted to "Reader."

<sup>18</sup> See Gen 9:12-17 for the story of the "first" rainbow – a sign of covenant with Noah, and of peace and provision. I had another, special moment walking along a street near Knox College in Toronto, before resigning my professorship to enter seminary. I saw "Tim" hand-written within dried concrete! I saw this as a sign that I was walking the right path. Now I urge serious caution and discernment in such things! But I have experienced moments of encouragement in the process of making life-changing decisions while partnering *with* God. Note, such things are *no* guarantee of a trouble-free ("blessed") life! For another example, see Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), 131-2.

<sup>19</sup> I *don't* believe the future is predetermined! It is therefore "possible" future, contingent everyone on partnering with God! (See, for example, Jer 22:1-5.)

moment of reassurance of God's presence with us, even as we face a new crisis. It is an *epiphany*; a mystery is being revealed!

I think those moments have *special value as encouragement for the journey*, when so often things are foggy and *not* crystal clear, as on the mountain top. In my experience, some have been *moments of grace* in midst of suffering; a reassurance of God's continual presence in the darkness. On other occasions, they have followed important life-changing decisions, and I see those moments as simply a message of encouragement to keep on going. Like the disciples going up the mountain, what happened was unexpected. Even so, I suggest the *timing was significant* here. Jesus has just told his followers that the Son of Man would undergo great suffering and be killed, and after three days rise again.<sup>20</sup> The transfiguration would then be a special moment of divine reassurance for Jesus, as well as a further revelation of the identity of Jesus to Peter, James, and John. Mark uses this experience to inform *his readers* that Jesus will enter into his future "glory" through suffering and death. Such irony!

Having paused on the mountain top and savored the breath-taking view, and having described the ongoing significance of such experiences, we could ask, "Why were they going up the mountain?" Mark does *not* tell us; only Luke's version tells us they were going to *pray*.<sup>21</sup> I suggest that by deliberately disengaging for a short while, only to reengage later, is a worthwhile spiritual exercise. That's what retreats are for! In part, that is traditionally what Lent is for too. Taking such time to pray, study, and reflect comes with no guarantee that a dramatic epiphany *will* occur, but it shouldn't *surprise* us if one *does*! I ask you to therefore pray for myself and for Session, so that we may get clear glimpses of what "could be" here at St. Andrew's. You will have read in the Annual Report of one new Presbytery-supported initiative that is in the progress of being realized, but delayed by COVID. But there is always room for more new endeavors! One final important point: I *don't* believe such epiphanies are just for special "holy" people! Mark's gospel does *not* present Peter, James, and John as pillars of the church, but as ordinary people who all too often make a royal mess of things! That gives encouragement for every one of us! As I said before, epiphanies are *moments of grace*, *not* something that God hands out as a reward for good behaviour!<sup>22</sup> May we therefore all continue to learn to recognize God in daily life, as well as in fleeting rainbows, or vivid sunsets. And may we discern the special significance some of those moments, maybe divine words of hope, healing, reassurance, peace, comfort, guidance, forgiveness, or encouragement. The timing and the need are *already* known to God. Consequently, when we come to him in prayer and faith, we are *deliberately* including him in our situations. If that is the case, then let us not be so surprised when God responds in surprising ways! Amen.

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<sup>20</sup> Mark 8:31-32. The "must" (I used "would" for simplicity!) is to counteract a particular point that needed emphasis, since for many first-century Jews the Messiah was a glorious and powerful figure, not a suffering one. This would be in contradiction to all Jewish expectations of a Messiah. The Transfiguration, then, only sharpens the paradox of the cross.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 9:28; Luke tells us Jesus often sought out God in solitude to pray, away from the world and others, in order to seek discernment and discover perspective. Moreover, mountain tops – where heaven earth meet – were traditionally places where God was to be encountered. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Transforming-Jesus.pdf> .

<sup>22</sup> See Matt 7:7-11, esp. 11, and Luke 11:9-13, esp. 13.