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**The Transfiguration of Our Lord      February 15, 2015**

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### **“Who is He?”**

*(Mark 9:2-9)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**2** And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was **3**transfigured before them, **3** and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. **5** And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." **6** For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." **8** And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. **9** 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.

*(Mark 9:2-9)*

## **Collect of the Day**

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen**

Somewhere near the middle of Mark's Gospel, you can sense the tone has changed. Things are more serious. Crowds gather. Followers and critics alike are beginning to ask more pressingly, "Who is this guy?" "Who is this man Jesus?"

After he settled the storm the disciples asked, "Who is this that even the winds and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41). After he healed the man born blind the Pharisees demanded to know, "Who is this that healed you? What do you have to say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" (Jn. 9)

By now, everyone knows he's a preacher and a teacher, but not the run of the mill sort. Mark 1: "They were astonished at his teaching" (v. 22). By now, most in Galilee knew he was also doing miracles. Matthew 4: "And he went throughout all Galilee . . . healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread through all the region." (Mt. 4:23ff). His teaching and miracles have captured their attention, and now they are asking, "Who really is this Jesus?"

Two things happen by way of an answer. First, he asks his friends, "Who do people say that I am?" Some say you're John the Baptist, they answer, come back from the grave for a second go around. Others Elijah. They chuckle and say there are all kinds of harebrained ideas out there. Then he puts it to them: "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Peter, always the first to speak, blurts it out,

“You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the Living God.”

No one had ever said anything like that before. No one knew really what it meant. The words were barely out of Peter’s mouth before he demonstrates that he too doesn’t know what it means. Peter stumbles all over himself, actually starts to argue with Jesus when Jesus explains that to be the Messiah would mean his death on a cross. “This will never happen to you!” Peter insists (Mk. 8:27ff).

Though his disciples don’t understand or like it, that’s the first answer to “Who is this Jesus?” He is the Christ, the long awaited Messiah who would be executed on a Roman cross. The second answer is the very next thing that follows Peter’s confession in Mark, and it is our Gospel lesson for today.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to a high mountain. What happens on that mountain top defies description. We call it the Transfiguration. They saw Jesus as they had never seen him before and their senses were dazzled and overloaded. His clothes became radiant Mark says, not just reflecting, but radiating light. Moses and Elijah are there. Again it’s Peter who is first to speak and essentially, he says, “Wow! This is great! Let’s mark the spot with a few tents so that we won’t ever forget what happened here.” In his account, Mark sort of apologizes for Peter, “He did not know what he was saying, for he was terrified.” Then a cloud descends and there is a voice: “This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!” And then, just like that, it was over and they stood in the silence of the mountaintop.

So who is this Jesus? First answer, he is the Christ, the Messiah, who will die in weakness on a Roman cross. Second answer is given at his Transfiguration by what they see and what they hear from the voice from heaven: “This is my Son.”

For a moment at least, the three closest friends of Jesus understood, that God was with him . . . that when Jesus spoke they needed to listen, because it was God speaking.

And they needed to watch what he did, watch very carefully from here on, because in him God was acting. This new revelation of Jesus was rearranging and scrambling everything they thought they knew about God.

One of the oldest and most important of their religious traditions was that there shall be no images of God. For thousands of years it was drilled into them: “Don’t ever worship anything that was created. Therefore, no graven images, no statues, or pictures.” God simply cannot be reduced to an image or artifact made by human beings. And yet, because of the Transfiguration, these three now understood that when they looked at the man Jesus, they were looking at the face of God.

Several centuries earlier, the great Greek philosopher Aristotle said that God was perfect, and by that, he meant unchanging, unaffected by anything else, indifferent really. Because if God cared about the world, that would make God vulnerable to what was going on in the world. That would make no sense at all, for then almighty God would be vulnerable to the drama in your life and mine. Then we, mere mortals, would have some control over God with all our drama and some impact on God. Aristotle was of the opinion, therefore, that for God to be God, he had to have nothing to do with the world, completely aloof. You can imagine then what Aristotle and his friends would have to say about God, out of love for the world, becoming incarnate in Jesus, and God weeping because his friend Lazarus died, and God getting angry at the Pharisees for their unbelief, and God dying on a cross out of love and compassion for the world. Paul would later write “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and to the Greeks [to the offspring of Aristotle], utter foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23).

But now, in the Gospel of Mark, people are slowly, reluctantly, coming around to this inescapable conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. Slowly, reluctantly, people are coming around to the conclusion that when they look at Jesus, they are looking at the face of God. When they hear his words, they are hearing

God's Word. When they see him act, they are seeing God intervene in the world because he loves the world.

That is, they are seeing God in a new way. Or actually, they are recovering ancient ways of thinking about God, not graven but *literary* images from God's old Testament Word that describe God as a father, who stoops low out of compassion for his child. As an eagle sheltering little ones under his wings. As a shepherd seeking those who are lost and wandering about. As a husband taking back his unfaithful wife. Old, familiar images from the Old Testament, all of them, now made fresh and new in this One, this Jesus. When they see him, they see the compassionate Father, the Good Shepherd, the eagle, the forgiving spouse.

Jesus made God personal to them. Knowing Jesus, they knew God. Remember, Jesus was with people who were subject to the whims of the Roman Empire, pushed around, picked on for amusement by occupying soldiers, executed, crucified for stepping out of line, the bodies of their countrymen left hanging on their crosses as a lesson to others, taxed and betrayed by their own leaders who understood the fine art of political survival. These people thought they were nothing. Nothing until this man from Nazareth told them they were men and women of infinite value and worth because God loved them. They were nothing until they met a man who reached across the barriers of class and religion and uncleanness and touched them, touched their wounds and healed them, opened his arms and invited them to sit at table with him. They were nothing but pawns in a deadly game of political survival until he told them that God knew their names, knew their hearts, knew their hurts, knew how many hairs were on their head, and knew their sin but still loved them.

Beginning with Peter, James, and John, standing on that mountain top, stunned into silence, they began to see Jesus as God. "Listen to him," the voice had said. The word of Jesus is the Word of the Lord. Listen to him as he says that whoever welcomes a little child welcomes him. Listen as he says love your enemy and forgive those who hurt you,

even as God loves and forgives you. Listen as he says love your neighbor, and then clarifies who the neighbor is with a story about a stranger lying half dead in the middle of the road. Listen as he says we should never be afraid, because he will be with us forever. Listen as he says not even the powers of hell will ultimately prevail his church. Listen as he says everyone who sins is a slave to sin. But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

That is, we cannot get to God on our own. We cannot climb all the way up to heaven on some kind of ladder of our own constructing. God has to come to us. God has to come down and meet us where we are. The Bible says and we believe: that has happened in Jesus . . . is happening in Jesus . . . in his Word, his body and blood.

Because God's love was fully in him, he is our Savior. Because God's unconditional forgiveness is in him, he saves us from our sins, the burden of them, the guilt of them, and if we allow it, even the memory of them. He is Savior not just for some, but for all, and earnestly desires that all should receive his salvation. Because God was in him, the grave was not the end for him, and therefore not the end for us.

But don't you have to do something? Don't you have to decide for Christ? Don't you have to heap up an impressive load of good works before him? Don't you have to be free of doubts to follow him, or mostly free of sin?

No. We are not saved by our own strength. We are not saved by our own works, our own decisions.

In the Gospels Jesus is the one who takes the initiative. Jesus runs down the lane to welcome the prodigal child home. Jesus goes out into the wilderness in search of the lost sheep. Jesus intercedes for the woman about to be stoned for adultery. Jesus invites the tax collector to be his disciple. Jesus welcomes those that nobody wants – prostitutes, sinners, unclean – invites them to table and sits down and eats with them.

The miracle of Jesus is that he comes not at our invitation or initiative, not because we have earned the right.

He comes to us because that is what love does.

Who is this Jesus? God's Word gives us two answers in quick succession. First answer: he is the Christ, the Messiah. Second answer: he is also God's own Son and your Savior. Amen.

