

Listen to Him!

Mark 9:1-13

Let's face it: nothing about the Transfiguration makes sense. Why does Jesus reveal His glory this way, and why was it so temporary? Why do Elijah and Moses show up on the mountain to talk to Him? It's all so otherworldly, so beyond us.

But at the same time, it's obvious that Jesus intended for Peter, James, and John to see all this – that's why He took them up on the mountain. In fact in the first verse of this passage, He told them that some would not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God in power – and if the Transfiguration wasn't a taste of the Kingdom of God, what is?

So, why did Jesus show them all these things that were so hard to understand? Maybe He just wanted these three to get a glimpse of His glory, to drive into their thick heads exactly Who He is. But if that's the case, then the reaction of the disciples may be the most confusing thing of all in this story.

For think about it. Jesus is standing over there glowing. And then Moses and Elijah show up. And the first thing Peter says is, "Master, it is good for us to be here."

Really, Peter? I mean, even when seeing the Transfiguration, this overwhelming, mindblowing vision of Christ's glory, you can't stop thinking about yourself? Even such a sublime, such a divine vision doesn't move you to self-abandonment, to worship, to praise? No. Instead of looking outward and upward, Peter's focus is relentlessly inward – not "How Great Thou Art," but, "It is good for us to be here."

But before we are too hard on Peter, are we really so very different? For if Peter saw a confusing and fleeting vision of Christ's glory, we have seen Jesus with much clearer eyes. For we know the end of the story. We know about the passion and justice of God displayed in the cross. We understand what confused the disciples so much in verse 10, for we have read of the triumphant splendor of the empty tomb. And because Jesus ascended into Heaven, we know that He will come again in much greater glory to judge the living and the dead.

We know all this, much more clearly than Peter did during the Transfiguration. But where is our focus, day in and day out? Oh, we know so much about Jesus, but do we live a more worshipful existence? Are we living for God's glory, or are we more concerned with what we can get out of discipleship? Are we preoccupied with serving Christ, with bearing witness for Christ, or are we grasping for the peace, the joy, or the contentment that He promises? Sure, we've heard the words of Christ, but are we really listening to Him any more than Peter was?

And then, of course, there's Peter's comment about the three tabernacles. What in the world is that all about? Gazing at the glorious splendor of the trio on the mountainside, why would Peter think they could possibly be interested in any sort of tent He could construct on the spur of the moment? For the Transfigured, glorified Christ to live in a shanty of sticks would be like the President of General Motors stepping out of his Cadillac Escalade, and then being offered a Big Wheel to ride on. Peter's offer is so inadequate that even Mark seems to be embarrassed for him – pointing out that he didn't know what he was saying.

I wonder, though, if we don't at times fall into a similar snare, over-estimating the value of our own efforts. For isn't it easy for us, even while we gaze on the grandeur and splendor of God's amazing creation, somehow still to indulge in the sin of pride? And even when we think of the costly sacrifice of the cross, a free gift which Christ offered on our behalf, isn't it still somehow possible for us to imagine that our own feeble attempts at righteousness still matter, still make us somehow better than others? Yes, it's so easy for us to forget what Isaiah said – that we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.

So, maybe like Peter, we need to open our ears and listen, really listen, to what the Bible says about the seriousness of sin, about how deeply ingrained it is in our souls. Maybe if we would look, really look at the radiance of Jesus' glory we would realize how far we have fallen from the image of God in which we were created. If we will look, really look at the dazzling white purity of his garments, we would get a clearer picture of how soiled and

stained ours really are. Maybe then we would lose some of our pride and complacency and remember our weakness, how desperately we need Christ to wash us clean and pure, and clothe us with His righteousness, and make us white as snow.

But there's another possible reason that Peter makes mention of these tabernacles. It's very likely that he is indulging in an understandable desire to prolong that mountain-top experience. Perhaps he hopes that by providing some lodging, he can make the glory and the splendor last a bit longer. That makes sense, for who among us wouldn't want such a transcendent moment to linger?

But perhaps Peter's mention of these tabernacles indicates an even deeper longing. For the Feast of Tabernacles was the Old Testament festival that celebrated, not just a past event, but a future one. This was the festival that not only looked back to celebrate the Exodus, God's deliverance of His people from Egypt. It also looked forward to the time when God would deliver His people again, when He would return to earth to make real what first the Tabernacle of Moses and later on the Temple of Solomon could only symbolize – the dwelling of God with His people. God would camp out, would tent alongside His people.

In other words, it is very possible that Peter's believed that, with the coming of Moses and Elijah and the glorification of Christ, the Kingdom of God had finally come. This is the end of history – it's over. So, let's set up the tabernacles and have a feast, and celebrate the Kingdom of God in all its splendor!

Of course, we know better. We know why Moses and Elijah disappeared into the cloud, and why Jesus returned to his previous, merely human appearance. We know why they could not linger on the mountaintop – there was much work left for Jesus to do. For after all, He hadn't come to earth to stay, not this first time.

And that's exactly what He was trying to explain to the disciples on their way down the mountain – that He, the Son of Man, wasn't going to come in the way they expected. The Transfiguration wasn't going to be permanent, at least not right then. No, He must first suffer many things, and even die – the main point of the Transfiguration was thus precisely that it was temporary, so it wasn't time to build those tabernacles just yet.

And that's why Jesus told them what He did about the coming of Elijah – that John the Baptist had in fact come in the spirit and power of Elijah to restore all things, just as Malachi had predicted he would. But the leaders of the day had not received his message – they hadn't listened to him any more than the disciples had listened to Jesus. Instead, the leaders of the day did whatever they wanted to John – throwing him in jail, and eventually putting him to death. What had happened to John was going to happen to Jesus – that's what He was trying to tell His disciples.

If only they had listened to what Jesus was saying! And this wasn't the first time Jesus had told them all this, was it? Back in chapter 8 verse 31, Jesus had also tried to explain the difference between his first and second coming, but they didn't get it then either. He had told them plainly that He must suffer and be rejected and be killed and rise from the dead before He could come again in glory. He had told them all this, and He told them again in verses 9 and 12 of today's passage.

But they didn't listen to Him. They continued to expect Him to bring blessings in this world, right now. They continued to expect Him at any moment to declare the Kingdom of God on earth, to expel the Romans and rule in Jerusalem. They wanted to build those Tabernacles, and celebrate the coming of the Kingdom in all its fullness – right now.

And so this may just be the most confusing thing of all about the Transfiguration: how in the world could these disciples follow Jesus, see His miracles, hear his words, believe that He was the Messiah sent from God, and even catch a vision of His glory – how could they do all this without really listening to Him? And even when God the Father Himself descends from heaven in a terrifying cloud and speaks directly to them, just as He thundered to Moses from the top of Sinai, they are still clueless. Even when the Father says, "This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him!" – they don't listen.

In fact, they don't really listen for the rest of gospel of Mark. Oh, sure, they follow Jesus for awhile, until He finally makes it clear that He came, not for a crown, but for a cross. But it wasn't until they saw Him meekly surrender to Judas and the mob that all their hopes of earthly glory finally vanished. And at that point, they abandoned Him. No, they never did listen, until after He rose from the dead.

Christians, what will it take for us to listen? Sure, we know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the World. But what will it take for us truly to listen to Him? What will it take for us to look at His shining white garments and thus see the remnants of sin in our own lives more clearly? What will it take for us to follow Jesus to the cross, to die to the sin that remains in our lives? What will it take?

Sure, we know that Jesus is the Son of God. But what will it take for us to listen to Him? What will it take for us to gaze upon His divine glory and listen to His Father's testimony of Him? What will it take for us to put aside all our expectations of happiness and comfort? What will it take for us to put aside our fear and worry and instead believe that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, all power in Heaven and on Earth really has been given to Him? What will it take for us to trust Him, to give our lives completely to Him, to put aside our own desires and live for His glory?

Our Messiah has been revealed to us in glory. He has come to save us from sin and death. The Son of God has come to rule and to reign over every aspect, every corner of our lives. He calls us to follow Him, even to the cross of self-denial.

The One Who speaks is our Savior and our Shepherd, our Lord and our King. Will we listen to Him?