

## **Transfiguration of the Lord (The Sunday before Ash Wednesday)**

**II Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9; II Corinthians 4:3-6**

**Mark 9:2-9** is Mark's account of the Transfiguration. Jesus, Peter, James and John go up onto a high mountain where Jesus becomes transfigured before them, his clothes "dazzling white". Suddenly, he is joined by two others who are quickly identified as Elijah and Moses. Peter, overwhelmed with what he is seeing, inappropriately suggests that a monument be built in the spot to commemorate Jesus' meeting with the representatives of the Law and Prophets. A voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him". Then the scene fades, returning to a "normal" Jesus, who then instructs the disciples to say nothing of what they have witnessed until he is "risen from the dead". That is the story. But what does it mean?

This story stands at the very edges of the Real, bringing reality close to Reality. It is a story about power – about the transcendent, almost-impossible-to-grasp power of God, the power of God's intended purpose, and the puny, totally inadequate and even inappropriate power of humanity! That demonstration of the power and intentionality of God is expressed through several transcendent happenings.

First, Jesus is transformed before the very eyes of his closest disciples (9:2-3). It is as if they are, for the first time, seeing Jesus as he truly is. Jesus' transfiguration is an indisputable witness to the disciples that this man is, indeed, the Son of God – divinity encased within humanity! This divine testimony is particularly relevant at this point in Mark's story, because it was only six days earlier (9:2) that Jesus had challenged the disciples with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter had courageously answered, "You are the Christ" (8:27-30). Now, that to which Peter had testified is unequivocally demonstrated before their very eyes. And it stands in counter distinction to the increasing disbelief that both the Jewish religious and political aristocracy and even some of the crowd are exhibiting toward Jesus (8:11-13, 34-38).

Second, the text is careful to be very explicit in describing Jesus' transfiguration as "his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one<sup>1</sup> on earth could bleach them" (9:3). This statement is a clear reference to Daniel 10:5-21 that describes the appearance of a man "whose body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches" and who dazzled before the eyes of Daniel. This "man" is later identified as the partner archangel with Michael (10:12-14, 20-21). He describes to Daniel a battle between the angels (led by both Michael and himself) and the powers of demonic darkness symbolized by the evil systems of Babylon and Persia. Thus, the array of this archangel, as is the array of Jesus in his transfiguration, not a symbol simply of glory but of combat against the spiritual powers of Babylon, Persia, Rome and the systems of Israel!

Third, Elijah and Moses appear before the disciples, consulting with Jesus (9:4). Moses, of course, represented the Law upon which Israel based its faith. And Elijah was the traditional representative of the Prophets. The "Law and the Prophets" was the term used in Israel to describe the Jewish world – the political, economic and religious systems of Israel as represented by and implemented by the Pharisees, Sadducees, the Jerusalem priestly aristocracy and the

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<sup>1</sup> Alternately, "no fuller on earth could bleach them".

nobility of Israel. Yet, this was the system – claiming divine sanction for their self-serving actions and decisions – so opposed by Jesus. But here are the classic representatives of that system – Moses and Elijah – conferring not with the present occupants of these seats of power but with the radical rabbi of Nazareth who now stood transfigured before them!

Fourth, God speaks the decisive word, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” That word is the ultimate confirmation of Jesus as Messiah (political), Redeemer<sup>2</sup> (economic) and Son of God (spiritual and religious) that was first proclaimed at the opening of the Gospel of Mark (1:1) and confirmed in the confession of Peter (8:27-30). Now that testimony has reached its crescendo with God Himself proclaiming Jesus “my Son, the Beloved”.

But that crowning testimony is more than the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, savior and the monarch of God’s kingdom. That testimony is followed by the abrupt command, “Listen to him”! The command to Peter, James and John, to the disciples and to any who would follow Jesus is that they must move from celebration to action, from rejoicing in the arrival of Messiah to acting upon that good news in order to join with God in the building of God’s kingdom.

That is why Peter’s unthinking and even pathetic proposal regarding the building of three booths was not only soundly rejected, but also decisively ignored. Peter is suggesting that they resurrect the Festival of Booths (Lev. 23:39-43) so that the disciples might dwell in the presence of the originators of the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel (Exod. 25:8-9; Acts 7:43; Rev. 21:3). But God would have none of it! This was not the time for dwelling but for action; not for being but for doing! To “listen” to Jesus was to pay attention, to accept and to begin to act upon the words that Mark records Jesus saying immediately before this story (8:34-39). For it was those words that declared what it would mean for each person who would embrace Jesus as Messiah, Redeemer and Son of God, and in so embracing, would have to come up against the powers of Rome and Israel, and would likely pay for that opposition with their lives. What were those words that God calls all of Jesus’ disciples to hear, accept and begin acting out?

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (8:34-38)!

As was declared earlier, the story of the Transfiguration is a story about power!

**II Kings 2:1-12** is the well-known story of Elisha the prophet’s assumption of the mantle (i.e., the ministry and leadership) of Elijah in Israel. In fact, it is from this story that the expression originates, “taking on the mantle” of a predecessor (2:13-14)!

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<sup>2</sup> In the scriptures, the word “redemption” was primarily an economic term. That is, to redeem something meant that you “paid a price” for it, either through the exchange of money or goods. Redemption cannot be fully understood except within its economic context.

In the story, Elijah recognizes that his service to Israel as the one both calling Israel's king and leaders to accountability and Israel to embrace its calling was coming to an end. Taking his protégé, Elisha, Elijah set out on a trip. Several times on that trip, other prophets warned Elisha that the end was coming for Elijah. When they reached the Jordan River, he struck the water with his mantle; the river parted so that both he and Elisha could cross on dry land. Elisha asked for a "double share" of Elijah's spirit. "If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you", Elijah responds (v. 10). Suddenly, "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" separate the two and Elisha watches his mentor ascending "in a whirlwind into heaven". The young man cries out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen" (v. 12). Elijah has ascended to God (as tradition says Moses did and that Acts 1:9 reports Jesus did). But on the ground, Elijah has left behind his mantle. Elisha picks it up, and a double portion of Elijah's power comes upon him that transforms his ministry!

This story is meant to be a primeval story – not just a story alongside other stories, but a story that touches the very roots of biblical faith. In this way, it is much like the story of Jesus' transfiguration. The depth of the story is captured in three events in the story.

First, Elijah struck the Jordan with his cloak – wrapped up like a staff – and the waters parted, allowing both he and his protégé to cross the river on dry land. Clearly, the author wishes to liken this event to Moses' crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21) and Joshua's crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3:13). But readers of the New Testament would also liken this story to Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:47-51). In all four instances, a miracle occurs that is against all the laws of nature. And thus, the writer of II Kings directly connects Elijah's power and authority with that of Moses ("the Law and the Prophets"). And with the transfiguration story, Mark connects that power and authority with Jesus, as well.

Second, Elijah is carried up to heaven on a chariot of fire in the midst of a whirlwind. Images of fire, chariots and horses and whirlwinds were used throughout the Old Testament as images of encounter with God (e.g., Judges 13:19-21; II Kings 6:17). Here, all these images are combined into one (stressing the importance of the occasion). The fiery "chariots of Israel and its horsemen" is particularly symbolic of God's celestial army (see also the Daniel 10 passage we examined above). Thus, what the writer is intimating here is that, like Elijah, Moses and Joshua, Elisha has now joined God's divine army, and will become God's present warrior on earth.

Third, the story clearly designates Elisha as God's choice to be the successor to Israel's greatest prophet. And he is to possess twice the power of his mentor! The full significance of this action cannot be appreciated unless one understands the traditions of Israelite inheritance. In Israel, the oldest son received a double share of the family inheritance upon the death of the family patriarch. With that double share came the right of succession to the role of patriarch (Deut. 21:17). Elisha's desire for "a double portion of your spirit" was therefore a bold request to carry on Elijah's ministry. And Elisha proved himself equal to the assumption of that mantle.

Thus, this story is as much about power as is the story of Jesus' transfiguration. In both, God is at work to bring the right men to the right job (including Jesus' disciples) at the right time, placing His patriarchal blessing upon them, calling them not only to assume both the responsibility and power of their predecessor but to go far beyond their predecessor in moving

the world, its people, its institutions and systems, and even its principalities and powers to become the world as God intended it to be. Thus, both stories are profound actions on the part of God to call forth God's "beloved" that will work to draw the world to God and God's kingdom!

**Psalm 50** deals with money and both its right and wrong uses. It does so by stating most dramatically why it is wrong for us to think of ourselves as the owner of land or anything else.

"God calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" (50:4-15).

Why is it that humans cannot own anything? It is simply because God, as the creator of the world, is also its owner. God will not accept our burnt or slaughtered offerings because the sacrifice of life is not ours to give. God gives life, and only God can take it away. "Every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle (or domesticated animals) on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine" (50:10-11).

What God wants out of us, therefore, is not the sacrifice of another's life, but obedience and gratitude. He wants "a sacrifice of thanksgiving". And authentic thanksgiving can only be demonstrated through "thanksgiving"! We are to live out our gratitude. That is true sacrifice. That is true worship. "those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God" (50:23).

And what is thanksgiving and thanksgiving? The psalmist presents that by stating its negative. In other words, to not live lives of gratitude is demonstrated this way:-

"You hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother's child" (50:17-20).

In other words, thanksgiving is not simply speaking words of thanks, singing hymns of laud or having a heart full of gratitude. That is not enough. Rather, true thanksgiving is living uprightly and responsibly, committed to acting both with justice and with compassionate, grace-filled love toward all those around you. This is the worship that God wants from us, and the kind of life we are to live out in our daily existence.

**II Corinthians 4:3-6.** In the Epistle lesson for Transfiguration Sunday, Paul works with the theme of seeing through a veil. In our Gospel lesson, the disciples saw Jesus, not as he was “veiled” throughout his ministry but as he truly is in his transfigured glory – “God of very God, light of very light.” Likewise, Elisha saw Elijah being carried to heaven in a chariot of fire, and thus received a double portion of his spirit. Finally, today’s Psalm calls us to divest ourselves of the love of money in order to more truly love God in humanity about us, and when we do that, we truly see God’s intentions for us. Most of the time, however, we see do not see clearly. We see as if through veils, Paul suggests. We don’t see with the clarity of dynamic, living faith.

That is why he has come to the Church in Corinth, Paul suggests, as a “treasure in a clay jar” (vs. 7). He has ministered among them in the past and now writes to them, not to exalt himself, but to exalt Jesus. “We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (vs. 5). So, learn from the Transfiguration. Learn from Elijah’s ascent into heaven. Learn from the Psalmist. Learn from Paul’s humble sharing of the gospel. Allow “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” to shine into your darkness (vs. 6).

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