

Jesus, Take Us to the Mountain

Mark 9:2–9 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.³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.⁵ 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.”⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)⁷ Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.⁹ 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.

In Christ Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God, dear fellow redeemed,

No doubt you’ve seen the Southwest Airline commercials like the one that features the young executive who climbs into a car, thinking he’s giving instructions to his Uber driver only to discover he’s just jumped into a getaway car of some bank robbers. Or how about the general who rushes into the situation room to help stop a security breach only to learn that doing so requires he give his computer password to those in the room. With great hesitation he spells it out: i-h-a-t-e-m-y-j-o-b-1: I hate my job!

If you’re familiar with these advertisements, you know what comes next - Southwest Airlines’ famous tagline: “Wanna Get Away?” The commercials may bring a smile to our face, but there’s an underlying truth here that threatens to fill our lives with fear and sadness – the disheartening truth that life often makes us feel like we want to get away. Maybe we hate our job, or there’s so much tension at home we can’t stand it. Maybe our health is terrible or we’re buried in debt. We wanna get away. But where can we go? To whom can we flee? To Jesus of course. He knows what’s going on in our lives. He wants to help us just as he helped Peter, James, and John here in our text. These three men needed some help processing the things that were happening in their lives. And though they didn’t know it at moment, they would require “renewed” strength to handle the challenges they were about to face in the weeks and months to come. So what did Jesus do for them? He provided them with a mountaintop experience that gave them reassurance and renewal. Jesus wants to do the same for us. Believing this, you and I can boldly pray this day and always: “Jesus, Take Us to the Mountain” for the reassurance we crave and for the renewal we need.

Peter, James and John were, no doubt, still troubled by something that had happened just a week earlier. Life had been going so well. Just recently they had watched as Jesus fed 4000 people with seven loaves of bread. In Bethsaida they witnessed another miracle. Some people had brought a blind man to Jesus, begging him to restore the poor soul’s eyesight. Jesus sent the man home with 20-20 vision. If Jesus’ kept this up, the whole nation would soon be following him. But it was then that Jesus began to teach his disciples “**...that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.**” (Mark 8:31). When Peter heard this he scolded Jesus for saying such a thing. You know what happened next. Jesus told Peter: “**Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**” (Mark 8:33). Talk about wanting to get away! It was bad enough having Jesus call you Satan, but Peter had to also wonder where he had gone so wrong? He spent the last three years following the Teacher, thinking he knew him and what he had come to do. Had he wasted his time? Was his faith so misplaced?

There are times we may wonder the same thing, like right now for instance. What is it that has you so worried today? What problem in life is weighing heavy on your heart? I know you've brought some concern with you to God's house. I certainly have – something I've been stewing on, something that I figure Jesus could fix without breaking a sweat. So why doesn't he? Does he not care? Am I too much a bother? Or is he too small a Savior? Even as I say such awful things, I'm sure you recognize my words for what they are – blasphemy – plain and simple. Yes, I said it, but if you've ever even thought it, you're just as guilty as I am, just as guilty as Peter was – guilty of having in mind the things of men instead of the things of God.

So where does this leave us with our Lord? Is he angry? No. Is he out to teach us a lesson? Yes, but not the kind you might expect, certainly not the kind we deserve. How can we be sure? Look at how he deals with us sinners. **“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.”** (Mark 9:2). Jesus gets these men alone, not to pummel them for their sinful thoughts and words, but to reassure them that he's so much more than a healer, so much more than a “fixer.” The disciples' faith had not been misplaced. Their expectations had been set too low. By their way of thinking, the best they could hope for was someone who would counter sin's horrible effects like hunger, illness, and the abuse of power. They thought like earthbound men, imagining that the best thing that Jesus could do would be to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and bring peace to the world by becoming some sort of earthly king. No wonder the disciples were so troubled. Jesus' talk of suffering and death was threatening to shatter all their hopes and dreams. Maybe we can understand how those disciples had gotten so far off track. For all the years they had known Jesus, he looked and seemed so much like them. He got hungry. He ate. He got tired. He slept. He laughed. He got angry. He even cried. Wouldn't it make sense then that one who was so human would seek to fix the human condition by dealing with humanity's big problems, like poverty, disease, and war? The disciples figured that if Jesus really cared about them, he'd stop talking about dying and he'd get busy helping his people.

What were the disciples missing? They were thinking about this all wrong. Jesus had not come to put a band aide on our sin-inflicted wounds. He came to get at the very root of our problem. He came to destroy sin's curse for us with his death and resurrection. He didn't come to simply make a better life for us on earth. He came to earn eternal life for us in heaven. But how could any man do that? No ordinary man could. Of course, Jesus is no ordinary man. He's the God-man. This is the lesson he means to teach by his transfiguration.

Here's some context. In order to suffer and die as the Substitute of sinners, Jesus could not make full and constant use of the power that is his as eternal God. After all, who would arrest God? Who would think to nail him to a cross? And even if someone had the thought, who to put Almighty God to death? No one! So for the sake of us sinners, Jesus hid his divinity under the cloak of his humanity. Theologians refer to this as the Savior's *state of humiliation*. Jesus never stopped being divine. His power was always there. He just didn't draw on all his power. He didn't put his majesty on display—not fully. Oh, from time to time people would catch a glimpse of his Godhood in the miracles he performed, but even then, Jesus kept his divinity in check. This was necessary in order for him to fulfill his saving mission. But now, as that mission entered its final stage, it was time for Jesus to reassure his disciples. It was time to renew their faith. Their expectations of Jesus had been too low. It was time to raise their sights. So Jesus leads them to the top of a high mountain where he is transfigured before them. **“His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”** (Mark 9:3). Mark makes sure that we understand this is not a Tide Ad. This is not some optical illusion caused by the thin mountain air. What is happening here is out of this world. The disciples are seeing Jesus for who is really is. Suddenly they see the rays

of Jesus' divine glory beaming from his eyes, flowing from his hair and piercing the very pores of his body so that even his clothes shine with his divinity.

“And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.” (Mark 9:4). Here's part two of this mountaintop lesson. What Jesus had told his followers about his impending suffering was not a deviation from God's plan. Jesus wasn't going rogue. This was long foretold by God's prophets, men like Moses and Elijah who had in fact joined him on the mountain to talk about his death and resurrection. How did the disciples react to all this? **“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.’ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)” (Mark 9:5-6).** No longer does Peter want to get away. Now he wants to stay right where he is. Can you blame him? He's experiencing a taste of heaven here on earth. I think that in some small way we can relate to Peter and what he was feeling. We too we meet our Savior, not on the Mount of Transfiguration, but here at Mount Olive. Throughout the week we've battled sin's temptations and must confess that too often we've surrendered to its lures. So we come here weighed down by guilt, worn out by worry, unsure if God is for us or against us. But here Jesus always greets us with nothing but love. He knows all about our sins, the ones fresh on our minds and those we've long forgotten. He forgives them all. Here through his called servant he proclaims us pardoned for the sake of his life sacrificed for ours on the altar of the cross. Here Jesus reassures us of our right standing before God, promising that just as he has risen from the dead, we too have a new life. We are new creatures in God's eyes, dressed in the holy life of love that Jesus lived on our behalf. Here we witness Jesus wash away sin in Holy Baptism. Here he touches our lips in the Holy Supper with his own body and blood, given and shed to redeem us for himself. Yes, it is good for us to be here – so good that there are days when I'm scared by the thought of leaving. I want to stay here. I don't want to go back to the problems waiting for me at home or work.

But we can't stay here forever just as Peter, James, and John couldn't stay on that mountain. So God sends us on our way with all that we need. **“Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: ‘This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!’ (Mark 9:7-8).** The mountaintop experience had come to an end. The disciples needed to be about the mission God gave them in life, as do we. But God doesn't abandon us. His beloved Son goes with each of us and is always ready to speak to us through the Scriptures. Listen to him! For his words not only reassure us of the peace we have with God, the same Scriptures renew us to face each day's trials and troubles. They teach us that the One who conquered sin and death on our behalf is with us not just to sustain us in trouble, but to actually make trouble serve our good. I must admit that most of the time I cannot make sense of the troubles I have. I just want to be free from them. But the one who turned his own suffering into our salvation, says that he will also do great things for us through the struggles we face. This is not something you and I can comprehend by human reason, but it is something we can cling to by faith, the faith that God works and renews in us when we spend time in his Word in our morning devotion, our noontime meditation, and our evening prayers. Think of it this way, every minute we spend in Scripture whether we are together or by ourselves, every minute is a mountaintop experience during which the Savior lifts our sights from the things of men to the things God. That's all the reason we need to pray: Jesus, take us to the mountain again and again to reassure us of your undying love and to renew us with your life-giving promises for our good and to your glory. Amen.