

Mark 9:2-9

² 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 covered 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.

Mountain Tops & Valleys

Are you on a mountaintop right now or in a valley? We all experience both. You’ve heard of mountaintop experiences, like when everything seems to be working out, like a day when you’re thrilled about making the varsity team, starting a new relationship, welcoming a new baby, or when you’re about to retire. Mountaintop experiences can affect the way you think about God. On the mountaintop it feels like you can see God’s hand working in your life, like he is very close, and it’s easy to be a Christian.

But during life on this earth, we cannot simply leap from mountaintop to mountaintop. You’ve also experienced some shadowy valleys. A valley happens whenever you experience does not live up to your expectation. You expect to find the one you love, but then the relationship goes into a tailspin. You expect to do meaningful work that you’re good at, but it feels more like punching the clock. You expect the doctor can give you some

relief, but her last words are, "I'm sorry. There's nothing more we can do." When experience does not live up to your expectations, the result can be disappointment even in our faith-life. Valleys affect our thoughts about God too. In valleys, it can feel like God is far away, like he's not listening or helping at all. Those are days when it's hard to be a Christian.

But here's the beautiful truth of this Sunday: God Uses Mountaintop Experiences to Help Us Through the Valleys.

Mountaintop Disciples

That's precisely what Jesus did for his disciples. They were coming off a wonderful mountaintop experience. Jesus took them for a men's retreat up north, and it went great. They were seeing eye to eye. The best moment was when Jesus asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter spoke for all the disciples, "You are the Messiah! The Son of the Living God." And they saw the Savior's eyes ignite. **"Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah! This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."** (Matthew 16:17-18) A mountaintop moment. Their expectations could not be higher! "The Kingdom of Jesus is here, and he's the Son of God! No one can stop us!"

Valley Disciples

But immediately, Jesus led them through a valley where their experience did not live up to their expectations. **"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again."**³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. **"Get behind me, Satan!"** he said. **"You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."** (Mark 8:31-33)

For six days, Jesus led them through that valley. For six days, disciples pulled their robes up over the heads, glued their eyes to the ground, and

shuffled southward through the dust. You've been there. We all have times when our experience with Jesus doesn't live up to our expectations when he's led us through a valley. Maybe you're there now.

The Mount of Transfiguration

That's why this Sunday is a thing. The Festival of the Transfiguration is a mountaintop experience to prepare us for dark valleys. **"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) Transfigured means that his appearance changed. Three different Bible writers try to describe it. His face shined like the sun. His clothes looked like lightning. Mark says, **"His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them."** (Mark 9:3) It was simply the most beautiful thing that has ever happened. What the disciples had expected, that Jesus is the Son of God, now they experienced as the glory of God shined on earth.

But Jesus wasn't alone. **"And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus."** (Mark 9:4) Why did those two appear to the disciples? Well, Elijah and Moses are from the first half of the Bible, the Old Testament. That's the Bible the disciples grew up reading, and they usually divided it into two parts, the Law and the Prophets. Moses wrote the law, the first five books. Elijah was the most glorious prophet. Now Peter, James, and John see their Bible heroes talking with Jesus. Another gospel writer even tells us they were talking about Jesus' departure. That is, Jesus is finishing up his plan on earth and returning to heaven. Jesus was showing his disciples, this plan, which shattered their expectations, isn't crazy. It will be challenging, but it's been God's plan from the beginning!

This mountaintop experience was so impressive that Peter started talking crazy. 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.)** (Mark 9:5-6)

They quickly forgot about Peter's crazy talk because God spoke. **Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)** God knew that we have ups and downs in our life. So to guide us, he said, "This is my Son, listen to him." God knew that the disciples weren't sure about Jesus' plan to suffer and die in Jerusalem. So he said, "This is my Son; listen to him."

By the end of the mountaintop experiences, there was no doubt about it. Jesus was glorious. The voice from heaven proclaimed it. The Old Testament heroes and the Old Testament scriptures prophesied it. And the disciples saw Jesus' dazzling glory with their own two eyes. Now, can they remember it? Can we remember it when he leads us into a valley? Because Jesus doesn't always look so glorious.

The Prince of Heaven

Transfiguration reminds me of a famous story by Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*. You remember the plot. A poor beggar boy meets a prince, and they discover they look almost identical, so they switch places. The pauper moves into the palace, and the prince lives on the streets. That's what Jesus did. The prince of heaven came to earth to live with us. But on the mount of transfiguration, for just a moment, he shed his beggar's clothes and showed us who he truly is.

But do you ever wonder, why would the prince trade places with the pauper? Why would the glorious Son of God choose to cover his glory, be betrayed into the hands of sinners, and be crucified? A woman in Bible 101 asked that question—not at our church but a different one. She asked, "Why would God bother with us? Why not just wipe the earth clean and start over with new people who would make better choices?" It's a fair question. The woman had brought her little boy to the class that night, so the pastor asked her, "Did your son get in trouble today?" "Oh yeah. He was actually in time-out twice." "Well, why do you bother with him? Why not just get rid of him and start over with a new child, one who will make right choices?" At about this moment, the woman started to think maybe

she needed to find a new church! “I can’t do that. He may be trouble, but he’s my son. I love him!”

That’s why the all-glorious Son of God would hide his glory and come to earth for you. He traded his clothes like lightning for a beggar’s robe. He traded his perfect holiness for your sin. He even traded his immortality so he could die your death and rise again for you. We need to see the height of Jesus’ glory to understand the depths of his love for us. **“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)**

Prepare for Lent

Do you start to see why we celebrate the festival of transfiguration? First of all, it gets us ready to observe Lent. Lent is these next 40 days, starting on Wednesday when we don’t think about the glorious face-shining Jesus. We remember that he willingly put aside his glory to be betrayed, beaten, and crucified. Transfiguration helps us remember just how much he gave up when he did that. And he gave that up for us.

Prepare for Life

But transfiguration also prepares us for life. Those disciples were discouraged when they heard about Jesus’ suffering and carrying a cross, and dying. We get discouraged, too, by our suffering. What’s discouraging you these days? It can be hard to be a Christian when you’re walking through the valleys. A bad diagnosis, a broken relationship, a challenging year, or years. But do you realize who walks with you through every valley? Not just “Jesus.” It’s Jesus, the all-glorious Son of God.

Yes, it’s good for us to be on a mountaintop for transfiguration. It’s good for us to see the all-glorious prince of heaven hide his glory like a pauper. And it’s good for us to hear him say, “I will walk with you through every valley. I know what it’s like to suffer on the way to glory. And one day, I will give you the glory. Your experience will exceed every expectation because I love you. I will stop at nothing to save you. I will wipe away

every tear from your eye. Because you are mine. Now, take up your cross.
And follow me.

Amen.