

“Listen to Him”

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).

Today, the season of Epiphany comes to an end. As we’ve repeated over the last six weeks, the word “epiphany” means to reveal or make known, and, in our readings during this season, we have experienced Epiphany in many ways. In the visit of the Wise Men, Jesus was revealed as the Savior to the Gentiles, and we witnessed the divinity of Jesus made known in His first miracles, we also heard a revelation of fulfillment as Jesus taught with authority, and then, with startling clarity, proclaimed that He was the focus of the Old Testament promises and prophecies. All of these epiphanies point to the power of Jesus and the purpose for which he came, and yet none of these manifestations of glory could have prepared the disciples for what they would experience on the Mount of Transfiguration.

As our text begins, Peter, James, and John journey with Jesus up a high mountain, and, as far as they knew, Jesus was going there to pray. This wasn’t the first time He had done this, nor was it the first time these three followers had accompanied Jesus without the other disciples. But this time, when they arrived at their destination and Jesus began to pray, everything changed. Mark writes, “And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:2-3). Quite literally, in a flash, Jesus changed, and His face and clothing began to glow with a brightness that no worldly light could rival. Then, as if His transfigured appearance wasn’t extraordinary enough, Moses and Elijah appeared next to Jesus.

It is a truly amazing event in the life of Christ and one that Peter, James, and John would never forget. To be face to face with Moses and Elijah as they spoke with Jesus in His glory; to be eyewitnesses to the history of God’s promises personified in these Old Testament icons was more than these shocked disciples could begin to get their heads around. So, in response, Peter makes a desperate attempt to preserve this miraculous moment in a very “Peter-like” way: “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you, and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (9:5).

Mark is quick to tell us that Peter didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, and this is where we need to pause. You see, as absurd and audacious as Peter’s suggestion may seem to us, we need to understand that, in every way, Peter speaks for us. You see, just like Peter, we love to be on the top of the mountain. Life on top feels good and we would do just about anything to stay there. Think about this idea as it relates to your life. We want our marriages to be happy and our loved ones to be healthy; we want our jobs to be fulfilling and our kids to be successful; we want our lives to reflect the glorious ideal that we’ve constructed in our hearts and we work hard to accomplish and hold onto this bright and shining existence. But that’s not real life.

Every day we experience disappointments and failures; every day we hear about another marriage breaking up; every day, we get angry with our spouse or frustrated with our kids; and every day the realities of real-life leave us desperately looking for anything that will help us keep our self-centered, impossible dream alive. My friends, *please hear this*: these are some of the most critical moments in our lives, because it is here, in the face of life’s setbacks and reversals; it is here, in the aftermath of disappointment and loss; it is here, in our moment of desperation that we are most severely tempted. We are tempted to turn from difficulty or ignore confrontation; we are tempted to flee from failure and condemn weakness; we are tempted by the devil, and our own sinful flesh, to abandon our challenging situations for whatever lie promises us happiness and success. And just like Peter, we are tempted to stay on top of the mountain, rather than face the hard and real things in the valley below.

But, my friends, we are not called to live on the mountaintop. Instead, our life is in the valley. This is a critical lesson of our text, and one of the most important aspects of today's reading is found in the voice of the Father addressing the disciples from "the cloud." You see, in response to Peter's self-centered arrogance, God says: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" And these words from the Father bear careful examination. You see, this is not simply a general word of rebuke from God to quiet Peter down. No, this Word from the Father is a totally specific directive to the disciples – *and to us* – about God's plan for salvation. It is in every way an epiphany! It is a revelation that points us to the way in which God will be glorified and through which His plan to deliver His people is revealed.

And, you can't understand this statement from the Father without hearing the verses that lead up to today's Gospel reading because at the end of the previous chapter Mark shares information that has a direct bearing on the way we understand the voice from the cloud commanding us to listen to the Son. And when we go back and examine these words we are told that Jesus, "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" (Mark 8:31).

And this is the key to understanding the epiphany of Jesus' Transfiguration! The Father says, "Listen to Him!" And when we do, we hear a message about the cross! And before the disciples could even begin to digest the idea of what lay ahead for *Jesus*, He followed it up with incredibly difficult words about what lay ahead for *them*. Jesus continued: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34–35). What a thing to hear! Not only would their Rabbi be killed, but they would experience cross-bearing of their own. *That* is what the future held for these men, and that is what we will experience as well.

I know that today, as we sit together in this sanctuary, some of you are exhausted by life. Some of you are devastated by loss. Some of you are discouraged by illness. Some of you are drowning in depression. Some of you are cracking under the guilt of a secret sin. And, today, some of you honestly don't know how you will go on. My friends, I'm here to tell you that, *today*, this Word of God is for you! The Transfiguration of Jesus was not only an encouragement to Peter, James, and John as they faced the crushing reality of the cross, but it is, *in the present*, an encouragement to us as we bear our own.

It takes great courage to bear the cross, to be honest about our failings, and to forgive and stick with others when they fail us. And it takes tremendous faith to repent of our sins and throw ourselves on the mercy of God and our neighbor. And the truth is...this kind of courage and this strength of faith can't come from inside of us. It can only come when we "*listen to Him*" because when we do...we die to our sin, and we lose our life in this world, and the Holy Spirit leads us to trust totally in the promise of Christ that just as we are joined with Him in His death, we will also rise with Him to life. And today, this is exactly the saving Word the Son of God is speaking to you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold