

# The Transfiguration

## Mark 9:2-9

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” 8 Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Last Sunday I was watching American Black Journal on Public Television when the host, Stephen Henderson, interviewed the author of “A Generation Found: Precious Pearls of Wisdom.” Roohee Marshall has interviewed senior ages 80 to 108 who live throughout the United States. They shared their life lessons. So, we know Ms. Marshall talks to elders when she needs encouragement. But who would you talk to when life gets tough and those around you offer words of discouragement rather than encouragement?

In our scripture, Jesus had such a time in his life. He was clear about his life’s mission, but his disciples were not on the same page. Jesus had a conversation with two people from Jewish history. One was Moses, the law giver, who helped free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and slavery, and then for 40 years lead them in the wilderness, to the very brink of the Promised Land. The other was Elijah, Israel’s greater prophet and miracle worker. He was the one who did battle with the prophets of Baal and who God tasked with anointing kings throughout his geographic region to be instruments of God’s reign and justice.

In the transfiguration story, which lies at the epicenter of the Gospel of Mark, halfway between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection, we don't hear the conversation of Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but we do hear a voice from heaven which tells Peter, James and John to "Listen to him!"—that is, to believe Jesus' word, which Peter had disputed; that rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection are integral to his messianic mission, and that the way of the cross is equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him (cf. Mark 8:34–38).

Neither God nor Jesus the Christ ever explains why this must be so; or, for that matter, what cross bearing entails for non-messiahs. In the entire Gospel, the reason is never given save in a fleeting hint that Jesus' death constitutes a "ransom" (10:45), an idea Mark leaves undeveloped and unexplained. The necessity of the passion remains, in this Gospel, a mystery hidden in the mind of God.

But if the reason is hidden, its inevitability should be obvious from the perspective of history. Jesus' devotion to the reign of God on earth inevitably provoked "the powers"—the fear, hatred, greed, falsehood, violence, and despair that pervade and distort everything human—to make their oppressive, murderous response, even if this response also, ironically, made possible the disclosure of the triumphant power of God's nonviolent love in their very midst.

The transfiguration is therefore also a powerful word to us to take up our cross and follow Christ, to walk in his way that in one way or another will provoke the powers against us, but that ultimately discloses the eternal truth and trustworthiness of God's nonviolent love and justice in the midst of evil.

It is important, however, when speaking of the way of the cross, to be clear about what it does not mean. It does not mean that we should seek or regard suffering as a spiritual good in itself or as inherently saving and redemptive—Jesus died because the powers of evil sought to destroy his witness to nonviolent love,

justice, and truth. His passion revealed, not only the “evilness of evil”—its intrinsic, deadly violence—but the transforming power of divine love, a powerful, assertive love that does not dominate and defeat evil so much as challenge, expose, and seek to transform it. Such love alone ultimately carries the day; it alone is truly redemptive and saving.

As Christians, we are not called to exhibit a passive love that simply tries to be good and avoid evil. Nor is the way of the cross a private bearing of personal woes for the sake of Jesus. It is rather a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world’s power game of domination, exploitation, greed, and deception. The transfiguration story is a call to affirm the ultimate truth of this contrary claim of God and God’s way of salvation, and to begin living it with all our heart, soul, and strength in the confidence that Jesus’ nonviolent way is truly the way of salvation, healing, and eternal life.

The story of the transfiguration also reveals Jesus as utterly unique, not to be equated with even the immense spiritual stature of a Moses and an Elijah. Yet his uniqueness and divinity are not on public view. The divinity of Christ is known only to those to whom it is revealed; it is not a matter of public record.

Today noisy evangelical movements—and the mainline churches as well—often make claims for Jesus’ divinity as if it were a public truth that anyone might see and grasp. However, the knowledge of Jesus as the divine Son is a matter of revelation that comes in God’s own way and time—as a gift. It is not a possession on the basis of which we can claim spiritual status and institutional or personal power, as if to make little gods of ourselves by ruling the world in his name as many have sought to do (9:33–37!). Like Peter, we want to build tabernacles; like the quarreling disciples, we want our little egos to bask in Jesus’ power and glory. But the Gospel of Mark repudiates all such claims. Jesus’ mission was not to make a big deal of himself or to elevate his followers to positions of power, authority,

and prestige through identification with him. It was rather to point through and beyond himself to God and to God's coming reign on earth, and to invite his followers to find their voice in bearing witness to this transforming, redemptive God (see 16:8). **Rodney J. Hunter**

So, Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah was about crucifixion and resurrection which lie at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry. People were speculating that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead; maybe Elijah or one of the prophets (8:28; cf. 6:14–16). Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29), which is the evangelist's opinion, too (1:1). In effect, Jesus insists, Peter's answer needs to be recontextualized by recognizing that Jesus Christ stands in the great tradition of prophets persecuted by the establishment (8:29). Yes, Elijah must come first to restore all things, but John the Baptist is Elijah, who has prepared the way through his antiestablishment preaching and martyrdom (6:17–29; 9:12–13). Jesus also will be rejected by the establishment and be killed (Mark 8:31; 10:33–34).

Crucifixion and resurrection go together in Mark's Gospel. It is misleading to speak simply of Jesus' "passion predictions" when all three sayings predict third-day resurrection at the same time (8:31; cf. 9:31, 10:33–34). Just because our text does not preserve original stories of the appearance of the risen Jesus, does not mean that Mark's Gospel is skeptical about resurrection. Jesus raised Jairus's daughter (5:35–42). Coming down the mount of transfiguration, Jesus forbids the inner circle of disciples to mention the vision until he has risen from the dead (9:9). The man at the tomb tells the women that the resurrected Jesus will meet them in Galilee (16:6–8), just as he had promised at the Last Supper (14:28). Earlier, Jesus warned the disciples not to make him ashamed of them when he comes in the glory of the Father with the holy angels (8:38). Crucifixion is in Jesus' future, but the Father's honor and glory and power are his as well.

Functionally speaking, Jesus self-identifies as the Messiah who will be rejected and killed by the establishment, who will rise on the third day and return in glory. And Jesus identifies his disciples as the ones who take up their cross, who love Jesus more than our lives, who are not ashamed to confess Jesus publicly, the ones whom Jesus will acknowledge before the Father upon his glorious return (8:34–38). **Marilyn McCord Adams**

High on the mountain, in a moment of numinous splendor, Jesus was indeed clothed in the dazzling light of God—but only briefly, and to a select few. The heavenly mystery was unveiled, only to be veiled again on the cross—and to be revealed again, not in the glorious light of a resurrection appearance, but in an empty tomb with a solitary human figure announcing his resurrection and return to Galilee.

So, again I ask, who would you decide to talk to in times of difficulty and discouragement? Jesus chose Moses and Elijah. Who will encourage you to be humble, nonviolent, yet demonstrate assertive love and quest for social righteousness in our attempts to follow in his way! **Rodney J. Hunter**