

LISTEN TO THE GLORIOUS SON

Mark 9:1-13

“Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

That iconic movie line was made famous, by Judy Garland, but I think that’s about how Peter, and James and John felt on this mountaintop with Jesus, don’t you?

Judy Garland, of course, played Dorothy in the 1939 film “The Wizard of Oz”. How many of you have seen the Wizard of Oz? Strange movie, really, isn’t it? Actually kind of creepy. It is probably one of the creepier movies I’ve seen. But it is one of the quintessential American movies of the 20th century.

Most of you have seen the movie, so you know the story of Dorothy and her little dog Toto. A tornado carries them from their farm in rural Kansas to the colorful and strange land of Oz. Dorothy’s quest to find a way back to Kansas leads her down the yellow brick road to find the wonderful wizard of Oz, and along the way she meets up with the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Cowardly Lion, all who have needs of their own they hope the Wizard can fulfill.

After a long journey, Dorothy and her three traveling companions arrive at the Emerald City to see the wizard. But the wizard, who appears as this giant flaming powerful sounding head, tells them that he won’t grant what they want unless they broom him the broomstick of the wicked witch of the west. Well, Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the Tinman and the Lion, all travel toward certain death, through the haunted forest, battling flying monkeys, into the witch’s castle, where in the end the witch ends up melting to her death when she is soaked by a bucket of water.

Well, returning to the Wizard of Oz with the witch’s broomstick, the climactic scene of the movie is about to take place when the Wizard finally gives the four characters what they’ve asked for. But as they are talking to this flaming smoking head of the wizard, he starts pushing off granting their wishes, but suddenly, in a hidden corner of the room, Toto the dog runs over, pulls back the curtain, and reveals to everyone that the powerful, great, and wonderful wizard of Oz is much, much less great and wonderful than Dorothy and her friends expected. In fact, he isn’t really powerful or great at all, but simply an old man turning dials and pushing buttons on a machine.

Now, you might not even recognize it, and you probably wouldn’t want to admit it, but I think that there is part of every one of us that struggles with a lingering doubt, subtle hesitation, this thought that one day, the curtain is going to be pulled back to reveal that the God you are giving your life to as a Christian is actually much less good and glorious than you expected.

There are these hidden corners of all of our hearts where there remains a faint unease that we are going to end up giving Jesus our lives and our allegiance, the best of who are are and what we have, picking up our cross as he’s commanded us to, following him into certain death, only to discover that behind the curtain, this God who calls for our allegiance and our worship and our obedience is not the

powerful, sovereign, loving, merciful God of grace he claims to be, but something much less. We wonder, at some point is the veil going to be pulled back and we'll regret having put our trust in him?

Now, you might not put it quite that way in your own life. You might have never thought about it in those terms, but you definitely know the effects of this lingering doubt in your own life. You might see it as an apprehension that keeps you from whole-hearted discipleship. It might show itself as this ever so slight distrust that hangs around the edges of your faith and causes you to hold back from giving yourself in an undivided way to Jesus. It's demonstrated in the fact that there's this part of you that you can hold back for yourself because you don't really trust Jesus with it. Is this Jesus even worthy of my allegiance and trust? We have contingencies right? We put our security and hope and identity in the stuff we see as tangible right around us, so that "just in case" Jesus doesn't come through, just in case he doesn't follow through with who claims to be and what he claims he'll do, we haven't lost everything.

Church, "is Jesus who he says he is?" isn't just a question that comes up for those who don't believe. This is actually an incredibly personal question for the believer that we need to wrestle with in our own lives everyday. Because it's this lingering distrust and doubt we feel - is he really sovereign? does he really have power to act in my life? is he actually good and not just generally benevolent to his creation, but actually good personally toward me? We have to wrestle with this, because this type of uncertainty will create a reticence to surrender all that we are to Jesus' Kingship in our lives.

Well, this morning through this text, Jesus wants to meet our quiet distrust on the mountaintop. Up here on this mountain with Peter and James and John, Jesus gladly comes alongside us in all of our apprehensions, in all of our suspicions, in all of our skepticism of who he is and what he's really like.

He patiently confronts our hesitations to listen and obey, to really trust him. Here on the mountaintop, in the midst of our reluctance to throw ourselves all-in as his disciples, he shows us that in him we will never be disappointed. The curtain will never be pulled back to reveal that we've been giving our allegiance to an old man turning wheels and pushing buttons. In fact, on this mountaintop, as the curtain truly gets pulled back on the true identity of Jesus, we find that we will never get less than we expect. That actually, this Jesus is immeasurably more than we could ever expect or hope.

Well, we're going to see all of that in three parts this morning. As the curtain is pulled back on this Jesus we're going to see that first, he is the one greater than Moses, second, he's the one greater than Elijah, and third and most glorious, that he is beloved Son of God.

So let's dive into the text this morning with an expectation together of meeting with and hearing from the glorious Son.

1.) Jesus is the one greater than Moses.

Before we climb the mountain, let's start out by getting oriented to where we are in Mark's telling of the Jesus story. This section in chapters 8-9 is the hinge on which this entire gospel turns. Up to this

point, Jesus has been out teaching and healing and delivering, he's been doing the works of the Messiah, doing Messiah stuff, but no one recognizes him as the Messiah, right? No one gets who he is.

But then at the tail end of chapter 8 things begin to turn. Jesus is in the region of Caesarea Philippi, and he asks his disciples this profound question - "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter, who's never afraid to speak up, as we're going to see several times, answers Jesus, "you are the Christ." You are the anointed one, you are the promised Messiah.

Peter is the first character in Mark outside of God the Father and the demons to get in some way who Jesus is. But very quickly the star student turns into the class dunce, right? Because it's at this point that Jesus begins revealing that he's not a king that's coming to take his place on a throne, but he's a king who's coming to be hung on a cross. Victory for Jesus is initially going to look like defeat. And Peter doesn't roll like that, does he? He's waiting to ride in with Jesus' army of angels, not be rejected along with him.

And from this point on, the entire movement of Mark's gospel unfolds in the shadow of the cross. Behind everything that Jesus teaches and speaks, in the background of every miracle he performs and every person he encounters, we begin recognizing the reality that Jesus' path is moving inevitably and intentionally toward suffering and death. An experience that we saw last week, is meant to be shared in some measure by those who follow him.

And so it's not without purpose that at this point, Jesus invites his three closest friends, his three nearest disciples, to go with him on a hike. Let's jump into the story together in v. 2.

"And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." And then, Mark says, in what has to be one of the most understated sentences in the entire Bible, "he was transfigured before them."

The Greek word that Mark uses here is *metamorpho*. And you don't have to understand Greek to recognize the connection to our English word metamorphosis. And in many ways, like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon there is an unveiling going on here of the true beauty and glory of Jesus. He is revealing to these three disciples who he truly is. And listen to how Mark describes what they saw, verse 3. "his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.... (and we're going to look at this other stuff that's going on here, but for now skip down to v. 7) and a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud."

Now there are several familiar things going on here. Especially if you put on the shoes of Peter and James and John, or if you were able to listen with the ears of Mark's first century Jewish readers. There is something that Jesus is trying to tell his disciples through what happens here, and that he's trying to tell us through Mark description of it.

Think about this with me for a moment. Here these disciples are, on top of a mountain. Now as we look at Scripture, there are several significant mountaintop experiences in the biblical narrative, right? But if you were one of these disciples, if you were a first century Jew, which one would stand out above

the rest? Sinai, right? The Exodus, God's rescue of his people out of Egypt and his intention to bring them safely to his Promised Land, which is the paradigmatic gospel story of the Old Testament, centers around what? Moses and his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. His reception of the Law, his intercession for the sin of the people, his relationship with God, all revolve around that mountain.

And what do we see, in particular in Exodus 24, when Moses goes up the mountain? There's a cloud of glory. The Lord speaks out of the midst of that cloud. There's even three named people that Moses brings with him, at least to the base of the mountain, and in fact, Moses even waits six days before he hears the voice of the Lord call out of to him out of the cloud. And what happens to Moses when he comes down from the mountain to the people? Scripture tells us that his face was shining. Do you hear the rhyming with what is going on here in Mark 9?

Now if you were Peter and James and John and you saw all of this that unfold right in front of you, do you think you might be realizing that this Jesus you just went hiking with is much, much more than you ever expected? Do you think the wheels might be turning for them as to what is really going on behind the curtain?

You see, in Deuteronomy, God had promised that he would raise up another prophet like Moses. Another who would speak God's words and save God's people. And what Jesus is showing his disciples, what he's showing us this morning on this mountaintop is that they, and us, are right in the middle of a new exodus experience. That with Jesus' arrival, one greater than Moses is here. One who is going to lead his people out of bondage and slavery, but not out of bondage to Egypt, not out of exile in Babylon, not even out from under the oppression of Rome, this Jesus is going to rescue his people from a slavemaster and oppressor much greater than any of these, he's going to deliver creation itself from its bondage to sin and death.

And just in case we didn't quite get the imagery that's going on here, Moses himself shows up on the scene. v. 4 - "And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus."

So we've seen first that Jesus is greater than Moses, but what about this Elijah character? I mean first, let's just admit together that this is a bit of a strange scene. Jesus is up on this mountaintop and suddenly he's joined by two guys that everyone assumes are dead, and they start talking together. It's all a bit outside of our boxes isn't it? But there is something fitting to what is going on here. Because if Moses represents for us God's past rescue and his covenant with his people through the law, this rescue and covenant that Jesus is both fulfilling and expanding, then Elijah is representative of all the Old Testament prophets and their forward gaze to the day of the Lord, a day when God finally would return to his forsaken people and dwell with them - when he would finally be there God and they would be his people.

And for Peter and James and John who knew their Bibles well, the sight of Elijah would have brought their minds back to Malachi 3 where God promises that he will send his messenger to prepare the way for his return. There in Malachi 3:1, God, who has no longer set up shop among his people, who's

presence is not longer in the temple, promises that he will return to that temple to be God among his people. And who is this messenger that God promises is going to usher in that day that he returns? He's called Elijah. Malachi 4:5 says this: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes."

This is why, when Jesus asks his disciples earlier in Chapter 8 who people are saying he is, they answer that many are saying he is Elijah. These first century Jews are wondering if Jesus is the messenger who will usher in the great day of the Lord. But on the mountaintop, as the curtain gets pulled back on the glorious Jesus, what we are seeing is that this Jesus isn't just the messenger of the Lord he is the Lord himself. This Jesus is the one greater than Elijah, because he is the one Elijah points to. And in Mark 9:13 we see that Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah, he sees John as the messenger that points to him. What we're seeing here behind the curtain is that in Jesus, the God who has seemed quiet and distant is returning to dwell with his people.

I know there is a ton going on here that doesn't ring for us the way it did for these disciples who were saturated in Israel's Old Testament story. But the point for us this morning church is this, Jesus wants to remind us on this mountaintop that he is the one who has come to rescue us and be with us. He's reminding us that our subtle fears of his failure to be for us who he says he will be lose their bite when we see that Jesus is not just something we add to the periphery of our life. He's not just something we can take or leave. He's not something that's true for you, but not true for me. He's definitely not a fad-diet or a self-help program or part of a pyramid scheme. He's not just one path to personal, existential fulfillment. He's not just the secret sauce to a blessed life. What Jesus is showing us behind the curtain, as the one greater than Moses and greater than Elijah, is that he is, in fact, the absolute centerpiece of God's eternal plan to rescue, redeem and live present with his people forever.

But don't feel discouraged, Peter doesn't quite get it either. Look at his response. v. 5 - "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Now commentators disagree about the specifics of exactly what is going on here. Does Peter really like hiking and camping and wants to tent-out for a while, is he just wanting to linger here? it's not totally clear. But one thing every commentator does agree on is that Peter is taking his foot and inserting it into his mouth. It's been a good week for Peter, right? Confess Jesus as the Christ, check, have Jesus call you Satan, check, make dumb suggestion to camp out on the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, check.

But it's obvious from Peter's comment that he's not totally getting the greater than Moses and greater than Elijah thing, because look how he refers to Jesus. Rabbi, he says, teacher.... not Lord, not Christ, not any term that would reflect the glory that is emanating from Jesus, simply teacher. And his suggestion that they set up tents for these three guys indicates that he essentially sees Moses and Elijah and Jesus as peers, as equals.

But then, God acts to make sure that Peter and James and John understand what's going on. v. 7 - "And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.' And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only."

Yes, Jesus is the one greater than Moses. Yes, he is the one greater than Elijah, the one Elijah points to. But most glorious and wonderful church is this fact - this Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

There is a literary beauty in the way Mark tells this. Because as we're gazing on these three characters of Moses and Elijah and Jesus, it's like we almost imperceptibly see Moses and Elijah fade out of the picture, and only Jesus remains. You see, there is one to whom even Moses and Elijah were incomparable, and that's Jesus - the glorious, beloved Son of God. Heb. 1:1 tells us that "long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." He is the incomparable Christ, God's final word to humanity.

Do you see the supremacy of Jesus that Mark is pointing us to here? You see, Moses came down from that mountain reflecting the glory of God, Jesus here isn't reflecting it, he's radiating it. This glory that we're seeing on Jesus is not some derivative of spending time with God, it is the substance of being God himself. This, church, is the eternal second person of the Trinity, the eternal beloved Son of the Father, the glorious Christ. One commentator remarks that Jesus is here turning himself inside-out for his disciples. He's allowing them to see the true nature of who he is as the incarnate God-man.

We just finished the Christmas season, and most of you know the words to that great carol - "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate deity." For a moment on this mountaintop Jesus is pulling back the veil and the glimpse we get is more than we could expect. This Jesus doesn't disappoint us, he's not less than he's claimed, he is God himself.

And the Father says to us this morning, the way he said to these three disciples - "Listen to him." Listen to him, follow him, obey him, give your all to him, trust him.

You might be saying in you mind, "Now Ben, if I saw that, if I was there to see Jesus' glory unveiled, if Jesus did that in *my* life, that would melt away my distrust and overcome my lingering doubts. Then I'd really listen, then I'd really be whole-hearted in my obedience, then I'd really love and follow Jesus."

But let me tell you something. To deal with this lingering doubt we opened with this morning - this fear that keeps us from being all-in as followers of Jesus, this worry that the curtain will be pulled back to show the God we've been serving isn't as good and glorious as he claimed? We don't need Jesus standing in front of us radiating his glory. Because there's something else that we see in this passage that is even more assuring to us that there isn't a disappointing surprise waiting for us behind the curtain, and that is Jesus' goodness.

And we see it on display in two ways here. The first is captured in the statement of the Father - "this is my beloved Son." You see, this is the amazing truth of Christianity church - behind the veil of the God we serve doesn't stand a God who's most essential characteristic is power, or authority, or control -

what makes the Triune God of Christianity utterly glorious and beautiful is that the most essential thing about him is love. We glimpse it here on the mountain - that for eternity past God the Father has loved the Son - and the Father's plan of salvation and redemption and rescue of the creation he has made is in fact, simply the overflow of the self-giving love he has for the Son.

There are times that we may be worried that we will pull back the veil and behind Jesus find a capricious, power-hungry, impatient and impersonal God whom Jesus is simply trying to appease for us. Let this declaration of the Father forever rid us of that notion. Because when the curtain gets pulled back on the mountaintop here, what we see is an eternal relationship of love between Father, Son and although we don't see him in action here, the Spirit is included in that, and we're invited into that through Jesus.

And this means that Jesus, in every way, reveals to us the heart of the Father. There is no disconnect here between Father and Son - no hidden motives or suspicious characters behind the curtain. Jesus openly and publicly puts on display for us the true character of God. Michael Reeves, in his book *Rejoicing in Christ*, puts it this way:

"Let us be rid of that horrid, sly idea that behind Jesus, the friend of sinners, there is some more sinister being, one thinner on compassion and grace. There cannot be! Jesus is the Word. He is one with the Father. He is the radiance, the glow, the glory of who his Father is. If God is like Jesus, then, though I am sinful like the dying thief, I can dare to cry, 'Remember me'. I know how he will respond. Though I am so spiritually lame and leprous, I can call out to him. For I know just what he is like toward the weak and sick."

In other words, Reeves is saying that all that we have seen of Jesus up to this point in Mark, church, his gentleness and patience with sinners, his compassion for the sick, his love for the needy and broken - this is God and no other. This Jesus will never be less than we expect. This Jesus will never disappoint us. Believe this with me by faith this morning. How could we not want to give our all to this Jesus?

The second place we see this goodness of Jesus on display here is as Jesus and his disciples journey down the mountain. You see, as they are making their descent, the disciples ask Jesus another question - v. 11 - "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And Jesus answers them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how it is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"

We've said that it's here in Chapters 8-9 that Mark's narrative takes a turn, a looming behind all Jesus says and does is the reality of the cross - and here in Jesus allusion to his own suffering we catch a glimpse of that cross that will be the place of his suffering and death.

You see, we can't stop at this mountain here in Mark 9 with the disciples merely to gaze on Jesus' glory here, because there is another mountain that Jesus will go up on to die. And it's on that mountain, unexpectedly, that his glory shines brightest.

And brothers and sisters, if you want to know beyond any shadow of any doubt that what lies behind the curtain is a glorious and good God who is worthy of all that you have and all that you are, who loves you in a way nothing and no one else in this world ever can, who cares about and is working for your ultimate good, who you can pick up your cross to serve, who you can follow into certain death without regret, you have to look to that mountain. Because it's only when you see that Jesus walked out his position as the one greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, as the beloved and glorious Son of God - that he walked out that privilege by giving himself in death for you that you will joyfully and wholeheartedly listen to him, obey him, trust him.

And what I want for us this morning church is that we'd look to those two mountains together. That we'd see his glory and his goodness behind the curtain and give our all to him.