

## **“Only Jesus”**

Mark 9:2-8

January 7, 2007

Before we took time off for Advent, we had been working our way through the Gospel of Mark. On Christ the King Sunday – the Sunday after Thanksgiving – we covered Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ.” That confession is a high point and turning point within the gospel. If you remember, Mark begins his gospel by stating that he is writing the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark has designed the first half of this gospel to raise the question, “Who is this?” Peter’s confession is the culmination of all those miracles, teachings, interactions, “You are the Christ.” The good news of Jesus Christ.

Thus, this morning we pick up with the second half of the gospel of Mark, in which he is pushing us to understand and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Ultimately, this has significance for you and me because we are lost without him.

As an aside and before we get to our Scripture, we also should note that today is Epiphany Sunday on the calendar. It is the day when many of our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters in Christ celebrate their Christmas. It is celebrated as a time of the arrival of the Magi – whom we have come to know as the “three wise men,” though Scripture does not actually identify how many or how wise they were. The Magi were most likely members of a tribe who were widely sought for advice because of their knowledge of secret arts – “magi” has the same root and is probably the source of our term “magician.” Anyway, the magi showing up and paying homage to this king of the Jews is understood to be the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

It also is “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday, where we remember Jesus’ approaching John the Baptist. And, if you recall, at Jesus’ baptism, there was a voice from heaven – much like in our Scripture this morning.

Mark 9:2-8

### **The Mountaintop Experience**

So, six days after Peter’s confession, Jesus takes a few of his disciples up to the mountaintop.

It is worth noting that Jesus does not take all twelve up the mountain. He invites three specific people. It is not difficult to imagine the other nine, “Hey, wait a minute, that’s not fair; how come they get to go?” God does not choose every one every time for every thing. Let me say that again: God does not choose every one every time for every thing.

And that’s ok. Why? Because God is God and we are not. We don’t get to make claims against God for what we are owed or what is fair. I’ll let you think about that for a few minutes before we get back to it.

This scene is reminiscent of the Old Testament passage that we read this morning. Moses is instructed to go up to the mountaintop to meet with God. He is instructed to bring specific

people, though some are only allowed to come part of the way. Moses goes up, waits for six days, and then is called from the descending cloud in the seventh. Scripture says, “the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” That means, back down on the plain below the mountain, it looked like a volcano, or that some sort of fire was enveloping the area where Moses was supposed to be. That is pretty frightening for the people.

The mountaintop experience is one we tend to want; many people say that they need the experience of God in order to be convinced or convicted. Some mountaintop experiences are wonderful and moving.

Yet, Scripture teaches us that mountaintop experiences are frightening. They are terrible. They are overwhelming. We call them “come to Jesus” moments for a reason: it absolutely strips away any pretense of self-sufficiency, pride, accomplishment, and ego. When we encounter the living God in time, in person, for real; we become acutely aware of how blind we can get in our day-to-day lives. When it happens, we do not always respond in the most appropriate or confident manner.

It is no different with Peter, James and John. In my imagination, Peter is kind of like Paul Teutel, Sr.; the father in the American Chopper series. He is big, muscular and intimidating. He has been a successful businessman, but he tends to have a temper, he tends to be a bit blustery and ornery, and he tends to speak first and listen later. The boys are terrified at the transfiguration, but not speechless. Peter starts talking about building booths.

Though what follows clearly illustrates that Peter does not know what he is talking about, he is not simply babbling gibberish. His suggestion is based upon one of the major feast celebrations – the Festival of Booths. Peter may have thought that Moses and Elijah were going to engage in conversation with Jesus for an extended period – like a week, for example – and that they were going to update the practice of the festival. We do not know for sure, but that may have been Peter’s train of thought. (You can almost see him saying to Mark, “You know, we could probably leave out my response...”)

Mountaintop experiences happen because God creates them. Much as we can want, much as we can pray, much as we can wish – it is God who creates them. He chooses. Frustrating as it may be for us, Scripture’s description of mountaintop experiences demonstrates that God is God and we are not. We cannot simply march up the mountain and demand things from him. He commands those who are to come to come. That is how it works.

### **The Voice “Listen To Him”**

There they are – Peter, James and John – minding their own business when all of sudden they find themselves watching Jesus have a conversation with Moses and Elijah. Among the things that are really odd (and there are many) is that apparently they had no difficulty identifying these two.

Think about this for a moment: Moses and Elijah appearing, talking, and living – thousands of years after their time. Scripture records Moses’ death. Elijah gets taken up to heaven in a chariot, but is pretty clearly absent for centuries before this time. Yet there they are, alive, and talking with Jesus.

This should be a great encouragement for us. Death does not have the final word and God is the God of the living, not the dead. Moses and Elijah were recognize-able; they must have had some sort of body, some sort of features that made their identities obvious to Peter, James and John. They talked with Jesus. We do not know what they talked about, nor do we have any quotes from what they said. But we know they communicated.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, “That’s all fine and well – and weird – but what does that mean for me?”

It means this: Jesus believed and lived in the knowledge of the resurrection. Jesus’ frame of reference was eternity. He knows God’s kingdom is coming into fulfillment, even with all of the earthly evidence around him saying something completely different.

There on the mountaintop, the voice says, “This is my beloved Son.” That much is not new. However, take a look at what comes next, “Listen to him!” This is not a suggestion, this is a command. It is an imperative. It is a direct instruction.

The living, resurrected Jesus still speaks today via the Holy Spirit. At baptism, the Spirit descended like a dove. At Pentecost, the Spirit came like tongues of fire. Today, the Spirit still speaks: do we have ears to hear? If so, we need to remind ourselves of the voice on the mountaintop, “Listen to him.”

“Listen to him.” What is the Spirit of the living, risen Christ saying? This is a question that has a very practical application.

The session of this congregations has been struggling with putting together a budget for this new year. I suspect that is not much of a surprise for any of you. (I would ask you to continue to pray for the session as we seek to be discerning and faithful to God’s call). We have spent a lot of time in prayer together, discerning together, and the one phrase that has come up a number of times is, “Step out in faith.”

This is a scary thing to hear in financially strapped times. “Step out in faith?” That could bankrupt the church – is that good stewardship? Is that faithful? Is that what we are really supposed to do?

Here’s the thing: if it is simply us and we are responsible for everything that happens here, then, no, it is not responsible and it is not good stewardship and it is a recipe for disaster. But what if it is the Spirit of God saying, “Step out in faith;” combine that with “Listen to him.” If that is the case, then we are compelled to look at things from an eternal perspective, one where God is faithful to his promises, and where we are required to do things that seem unreasonable to us in order to be obedient to his command.

Is God doing something new and different at Chula Vista Presbyterian? Is there reason to believe that God is drawing people here to glorify his name, to worship him, and to learn and train to be sent out as his disciples? I believe there is. The human part of me is like Peter, saying, “Lord, you want me to build you a booth?” Instead of speaking out of my fear, I need to keep quiet and remember the voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him!”

### **They Saw Only Jesus.**

Remember earlier when I said that we do not get to make claims against God for what we are owed or what is fair? Let me go back to that for a moment.

Jesus, greater than Moses and Elijah; Jesus, who commands Peter, James, and John to go with him; Jesus, whose garment is brilliantly white and brighter than any white possible on earth – this same Jesus is now on the road to pay the penalty for our sins. He is fully human and is now walking the walk to do the work of the Son of God. That’s the second half of the gospel of Mark.

One of the early hymns/songs of the church is found in Philippians 2:

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

Jesus made no demands for what was owed or what was fair. Instead, he pursued the path that led him to the table that he prepared; the table in which he declared the new covenant – the new covenant in which his body is broken, his blood is shed. These are not empty phrases: his body was broken. His blood was shed.

Yet remember that Jesus conversed with Moses and Elijah. There is a resurrection. We have the hope of reconciliation with God because of Jesus; we have the promise of eternal life in the resurrection because of Jesus. This is the good news we have to share, it is the basis of our faith, it is the foundation of our life.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Then, suddenly, the cloud clears and the dazzling disappears. They look around and they see only Jesus.

This is profound. Friends, in life, there are clouds, there are things that dazzle, there are things that captivate our attention, and things that seem so big. Yet, they are all temporary. The

mountaintop, the mundane, the good and the bad; all of these things are temporary. They will all clear and disappear, and we look around, and all we will see is Jesus.

This Jesus; this Jesus who was born of Mary; this Jesus who healed the sick, calmed the wind and sea, was victorious over evil, and raised the dead; this same Jesus about whom the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him!"; this is the same Jesus who stands before us now and says, "Come. Come to me. This is my body, broken for you. Come to me. This is my blood, shed for you. Come."

"Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus."

Amen.

8:15 Invitation; 10:00 song