

# Mountaintop Experiences

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Mark 9:1-8

**Sermons Series:**  
**In Christ Together**  
**for the World**

***“Jesus was  
transfigured  
before them.”***  
***-Mark 9:2***

**S**t. Catherine’s Monastery was built by the Roman Emperor Justinian in the Egyptian desert in 527AD. It’s the oldest continuous monastery in the world. Since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, monks have been awakened each morning for prayer at 4 AM by 33 tolls of its chapel bells (representing the 33 years of Jesus’ life).

This monastery is nestled at the base of Mt. Sinai, where Moses encountered the burning bush and received the Ten Commandments. Priceless artwork from the early Byzantine period is housed there. The monks gather each morning for worship in the Basilica of the Transfiguration. The apse above the main altar features an extraordinary mosaic that dates back to 566 AD. It’s composed of thousands of tiny pieces of colored glass and stone. The mosaic depicts the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, read a few moments ago.

Jesus invites three of his disciples to climb a remote mountain with him. Mountains in the Bible are frequent places of divine revelation. The three disciples in the mosaic are depicted at Jesus’ feet. John kneels to the left of Jesus and

James to his right while Peter reclines in the center.

Jesus is transfigured before them (9:2). The Greek word corresponds to our English word metamorphosis. Jesus’ clothes become incandescent, depicted in the light rays that emanate from Jesus in the mosaic.

Moses and Elijah are there, too, talking with Jesus (9:4). Elijah stands to Jesus’ left and Moses to his right. They represent the law and the prophets, the Old Testament equivalent of Mount Rushmore. Moses serves as the great lawgiver who gives us the 10 Commandments while Elijah is the legendary prophet who doesn’t die a natural death. Instead, he is transported into heaven in a chariot (2 Kings 2).

The other people in the mosaic are not part of this original theophany. The 12 disciples are shown across the top while 19 Old Testament prophets appear along the bottom. At either side of the top of the mosaic are the two patrons who funded the mosaic. Why am I not surprised they get top billing?

In this mountaintop moment, it’s as if the veil of Jesus’ humanity is peeled back

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so his three disciples can see Jesus' divinity. It's a portent of things to come. This crucified Jesus will one day be raised to life again.

Peter wants to permanently enshrine the moment. "Rabbi, it's a good thing for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings—one for you, Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (9:5). Let's just stay on the mountaintop and forego any more talk of your suffering and death.

Maybe you can relate to Peter. You go on a dream vacation, enjoy an enchanted evening or experience a once-in-a-lifetime achievement and you don't want it to end. Let's put down roots and live here forever. It's a mountaintop moment, and you don't want to let go of it. Who wants to return to the valley after you've been to the mountaintop?

In this moment, a thick cloud envelops Jesus and his disciples. Clouds are another indicator in Scripture of divine presence. God led his people through the wilderness to the Promised Land with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22; 33:9-10; 40:34-38).

A voice cuts through the fog: "This is my beloved son; listen to him" (9:7). And poof, the vision vanishes. Moses and Elijah vaporize into thin air, the cloud dissipates and our three amigos are left to contemplate what on earth just happened.

We've been asking three questions of Mark throughout this sermon series: Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response?

The first question is taken up in verse 7: "This is my beloved Son." Jesus stands in unique relationship to God. No one else is identified this way. Son doesn't imply subordination; it denotes the same essence as God. These words are reminiscent of the voice Jesus hears at his baptism: "You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Now to our second question, why did he come? Jesus says plainly in Mark 8 that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected, be killed and after three days rise again. Peter doesn't take kindly to Jesus talking this way and has a rather heated exchange about it. Peter wants to forego all this foreboding talk of the cross and enter immediately into the glory. Forget the suffering and the pain, bring on the happiness and the blessing.

It's always a temptation for Christians to circumvent the cross and go for the glory. We prefer the Mount of Transfiguration to Mount Calvary.

Five hundred years ago, the Protestant reformer Martin Luther challenged this theology of glory. Luther called the church to renew its commitment to a theology of the cross, as he called it.

***Whom do you  
listen to all  
day long?***

The theology of glory can be summarized this way: I obey; therefore, I am accepted by God. Some Christians think it's their righteousness or lack thereof that first catches God's attention. God accepts me only if I am sufficiently good and ethical. God's grace is a reward for good behavior.

Now contrast this theology of glory with Luther's understanding of the cross. The theology of the cross can be described this way: I am accepted by God; therefore I obey. Do you see the difference? When God thinks of you, it's not your sin or your righteousness that first catches God's attention. I am not saved by my meritorious behavior. I am saved by God's love and grace. I am loved by God. Therefore, out of gratitude, I seek to obey.

You will drive yourself crazy trying to earn God's favor. How will you know if you have ever done enough or loved enough? If God's love is tied to my performance, how do I explain that God doesn't always come through for me in a manner I expect? If I earn God's favor, do I also earn his disfavor? If I live according to a theology of the cross, then every day is a gift of God's grace. God owes me nothing. The result of grace is gratitude.

There's another problem with this theology of glory. If my identity is tied to performance, then I become furious

whenever someone attacks my "good person" personae. But if my identity is centered in Christ and his grace for me, I have the emotional ballast to handle criticism without fighting back.

The first half of Mark's gospel revolves around Jesus' teaching and miracles. The second half centers on the cross. When we come to the latter half of Mark, everything is told in slow motion to draw out the meaning of the cross. It's always tempting for Christians to skip the cross and go for the glory. Yet, we are saved by the cross. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow.

This brings us to the third question, what is our response? Let's return once more to verse 7. "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." The word "listen" appears in present imperative tense. This is my Son; *listen* to him.

Whom do you listen to all day long? Some of us listen to those little voices inside our heads. We listen to little incriminating voices or those excessively self-serving voices. Some of us take our cues from secular voices in the media or the entertainment world. We listen to the mindless chatter from social networks or the proverbial rumor mill. We listen to our electronic companions we carry around with us all day long.

Our family was out for dinner last week. I couldn't

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-old Sicilian  
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help noticing a couple seated near us. For a substantial portion of the meal, their heads were down in their laps. They weren't speaking to each other; engrossed in their iPhones.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc claims she is always hearing from God, which annoys the king. “Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't these voices come to me? After all, I'm the king, not you!”

“They do come,” she replies. “But you do not hear them. You've not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings, you cross yourself and are done with it. But if you prayed from your heart...you would hear the voices as well as I do.”

How do we listen for Jesus today? Let me suggest three ways.

We listen through Scripture. I've challenged you before from this pulpit to pick up the Bible and read. I'm convinced if you invest in the good, hard work of meditating on Scripture, Jesus will begin talking with you.

This past week, I was reading the book of Chronicles. It's a rather obscure Old Testament book, to be sure. Each day as I meditate on Scripture, I'm on the lookout for a verse I can carry with me through the day. This one captivated my imagination, “If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray

and turn from their wicked ways, then I will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). Jesus talked to me this week through this verse. If I humble myself, pray and put away evil, I open the door to God's healing.

We listen through prayer.

I've had difficulty sleeping lately. Some of you know the feeling. I decided to more intentionally close my day in prayer this week. I spent time before bed reviewing my day in prayer. Where did I exercise trust today? Where did I fail to honor God in the way I treated people or reacted to situations? I expressed remorse for my sins and gratitude for God's mercy. Then I closed the day with the words of Psalm 4, “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety” (4:8).

We listen through the company of God's people. Seek out people who walk with God. We need spiritual companions along the way of our journey.

Do you have faith friends? This church is not primarily an organization; we are a vast network of faith friends. Jesus talks to us to through our faith friends. An old Sicilian proverb says it well: “A friend is someone who tells you when your face is dirty.” This is the kind of friend who will tell you if you have a piece of spinach stuck to your teeth. Mere acquaintances won't say anything; real friends will!

