

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

BATHED IN CHRIST

Mark 9:2-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Analysis by Paul Jaster

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.

DIAGNOSIS: All Washed Up

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Mis-Speaking (Due to Mis-Listening)*

The Transfiguration is bracketed by the three passion predictions of Jesus. Confronted with the necessity of the cross, the disciples are reduced to blathering idiots. Peter

makes three major “mis-speaks” in his one sentence alone. First, Jesus is not a “rabbi”; Jesus is the very Messiah whom Peter correctly confessed earlier (Mark 8:29) yet whom Peter immediately rebuked (8:32) when Peter found out that the one he pinned his hopes on “must undergo great suffering, ...and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Second, it is not good to be “here” (up a high mountain apart, by themselves); it is far better being down below and going out to others to proclaim the necessity of Christ’s death and resurrection. Third, what they are witnessing is not a reprise of Sinai, the festival of booths (Succoth), and the revelation to Moses and the prophets, but rather God’s new thing (“new wine”) in Christ (a very different vintage!). What Peter said may have made sense according to the Torah. But according to the good news of Jesus Christ, it reflects closed ears, rejection, profound dis-belief, un-faith and sheer stupidity. Peter did not know what to say, because he was not listening with ears of faith to the gospel. All that we say is a faithless blather, too, unless it is connected with the necessity of Christ’s cross.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Terrified*

The cross is necessary for a reason. Before a holy God we are terrified without it. Contrasted with Christ’s clothes of “dazzling white, such as no one on earth can bleach them” are our own sinful rags. Peter and the boys did not know what to say because they all “were terrified.” They all were terrified because no one on earth has the wherewithal to stand before the full holiness of God and live-much less give an adequate accounting of their life. Peter’s sentence smacks of self-justification-a desperate attempt to please God and make the encounter with this holy God less terrifying. Many of our own words and acts smack of self-justification, too, especially when we get caught up in our building projects rather than God’s building project-booths rather than new births through deaths

and resurrections.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Washed up*

Apart from the cross, the ultimate result is death-a God-inflicted death (in the sense that our death is mandated by God's law). This was made so clear when God originally appeared in the cloud at Mount Sinai/Horeb (Exodus 19). Touch it and die. See God and die. Even a properly purified Moses was allowed only to see God's backside. And (at the same mountain) Elijah was only allowed to hear a still, small voice-an echo of God. Words from God carved into stone on high mountains have a way of turning into the slabs that seal our graves eternally. Apart from the cross, an immediate encounter with a holy God means death. Our death. Forever. Left solely with God's word through Moses and the prophets, we are all washed up. Those anything-but-dazzling, sinful rags, remember? If we are only out to build "booths" for God (i.e. please God with our building projects), the ultimate "booth" we are left with is a grave.

PROGNOSIS: Ready to Go

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Bathed in Christ*

Amazingly, the disciples do not die in this encounter. Instead they hear a voice from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" In the context of the passion predictions, this can only mean one thing: "Go back down to earth and listen to what Jesus is telling you about the necessity of the cross!" God's utterance begins with a resounding echo of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11). What pleases God is to have Jesus dipped into a baptism which is a death and resurrection for sinners. Jesus' baptism, his passion predictions, and his transfiguration all indicate Jesus' obedience and his readiness to go to the cross. The result is also death that is also God's-God's death. But this time in the sense of God's own saving death that is mandated by God's love and grace and mercy. This is a death that

destroys sin yet saves sinners. God's building project is not to construct "booths" for God's own praise but to resurrect dead or dying sons and daughters. Since Jesus is the sinless Lord (God himself, the Stronger One, as overwhelmingly manifested in his transfiguration and pre-resurrection preview of his post-resurrection appearance), death cannot hold him. And he rises to live again and baptize us with his cleansing Spirit. Our sins are washed away, too, as no one on earth could bleach them. And we emerge as the beloved ones of this God as well. This is a word of God, not written on some mountain top in stone, but rather inscribed with nails in the body of God's own Son upon the cross. Only those who listen to God speaking from the cross and empty tomb can sense the need and necessity for it.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Emboldened*

After Christ's resurrection (Easter) and their baptism with the Holy Spirit (Pentecost), Peter and the gang became emboldened witnesses who fearlessly proclaimed what they had seen-Jesus crucified and raised. They are ready to go faithfully into the future. Once our fear of God is transfigured into faith by the proclamation of the cross, we have no reluctance to say what Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you...and for all who are far away, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:38-39). These sentences smack of true justification. Not a self-serving accounting of our life to save our skin, but rather a self-denying accounting of Christ's life to save us all no matter what kind of skin we wear. This is what pleases God the most. This is how God is worshipped-through our faith in the Christ God sends.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Mission-Speaking (Due to Mission-Listening)*

The final movement in this story is down and out-a good word

especially to the down and out. God is not listened to and obeyed by a private, privileged band climbing up a mountain alone apart by themselves (e.g. through Gnosticism, asceticism, Temple-centered Judaism, isolationism, protectionism or violent militant separatism) but rather by seeing God in Jesus alone and following him to a cross and empty tomb, and out from there into a mercy-mission and a mercy-ministry, especially to the poor, the powerless and the excluded. The obvious obverse of the Lord's command "to tell no one" about what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead is "to tell everyone" now that Easter has taken place. As Philip Melanchthon notes in Apology IV of the Augsburg Confession, not to make full "use" of the Savior crucified and raised through law and promise witness is to "bury Christ" and to live on the other side of the resurrection rather than on this side. Once we trust in God's word of resurrection promise, we are ready to go on a mercy-mission and engage in a mercy-ministry. And what a better way to proclaim it and celebrate than in the "new wine" of Holy Communion, the gift of Christ's own body and blood. Don't build a booth. Be bathed in Christ. Build a festive baptismal birthday blast of Gospel witness around the Holy Eucharist, the Meal of Thanksgiving. And then go out, equipped and energized and "Serve the Lord!" For that is God's building project: Newborn sons and daughters, who are bathed, fed and "ready to go."