

A Glimpse of Heaven to Keep You Going

Mark 9:2-9 (NIV84)

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) ⁷ Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Ever looked east while living here and said, "I'm going to climb that mountain today?" My then 4 year old said that the first Sunday we were here in Utah as we were getting into the car to come to church. I've looked at those mountains many times since and wondered when we would climb all the way to the top. I know we will have to have time; it's not like we can just go start hiking up the mountain with zero preparation or obligations. It's going to take planning. We will need supplies, water, food, the right footwear, etc. It's going to take endurance. And the biggest question for us as parents is: "Can we make it up the mountain without having to carry little boys back down with us?"

Going up a mountain is a test of endurance and preparation. You have to put one foot in front of the other, take step after step, all the way to the top. Even though your muscles ache and you kind of want to turn back at times, you steel your will because you want to get to the top. Today in our Gospel reading, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. But even before that, they had already started a kind of mountainous hike by following Jesus. Six days ago, though, their hike following Jesus had gotten harder.

Six days ago, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29) Peter answered, "You are the Christ." (Mark 8:29) You are the anointed one, the one who has come to crush the head of the serpent, to defeat Satan. You are the descendant of David who will rule forever. You are the Ancient of Days. You are God, our Savior.

Immediately following that confession, Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31) He spoke very plainly about this. This wasn't foreshadowing; this was a spoiler alert.

Peter was beside himself. This is not how your story ends. You are the Christ...the powerful Messiah...God. You can't die. You're not here to suffer. You're here to rule! Peter rebuked Jesus.

In turn, Jesus rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Mark 8:33) Jesus then proclaimed to the crowd as well as to his disciples that if anyone would come after him, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow him.

The difficulty of this mountaintop hike with Jesus seemed to double with those words. Jesus is going to die a horrible and tragic death by the very people who should have been first in line to worship him. And if you want to follow Jesus to his death, pick up your own cross as well. Maybe the disciples thought to themselves, "It's time to turn around, quit this hike up the mountain with Jesus, and save my own life. This isn't a pleasant mountaintop journey; it's a death march."

Have you ever considered what it was like for the disciples to be knowingly following Jesus to his death? You have seen him heal people with incurable diseases and conditions. You have seen him drive out demons. Yet he will die. Is he really the Son of God? I mean, if he really was the Son of God, wouldn't he be able to figure out a way not to die? Shouldn't he be "unkillable" as the Son of Man? Do I really want to follow him if he will just die at the end? You've done great things, Jesus, but if you are just going to die, what's the point? And not only are you going to die, I'm supposed to hike with you to my own death as well by taking up my own cross and following you? I think it's time to turn around on this mountaintop hike.

If following Jesus only leads to his death and my death, what is the point? Who would want to follow a God who dies? Why take up a cross and follow him to death? Instead of spending my time here in church, instead of giving my money to church, instead of

volunteering for activities here at church, I might as well just go home. If I am just following Jesus to his death and mine, I might as well try to enjoy life instead of following a lost cause.

Going up a mountain strains the body. Each strain asks your body, “Should I go on, or should I turn around and head back? If I don’t turn around now, will I have enough strength to make it back down?” Sure, you can rest, catch your breath, but you know that as soon as you stand up again, the trudge is back on, and the strain is greater than ever as your muscles begin to cry to go home. What’s the point? Why continue going up the mountain?

Six days after Peter’s confession and his rebuke, six days of soaking in the information that Jesus is going to die, six days to mourn for Jesus. Now Jesus gives his disciples a literal mountain climb in following him. When they get to the top of that mountain. There, Jesus is transfigured before them. (verse 2) His clothes become gleaming white, whiter than humanly possible. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus, specifically about his impending death in Jerusalem.

Peter, James, and John are terrified. What is happening here? Peter has some recognition of what is going on. This is no small thing. Right now we are being shown that Jesus really is the Christ, that he really is the Son of God. I see it with my own eyes! He doesn’t have to die. He’s God. Look at his glory. I can’t actually. He is too holy for me, and I am a poor miserable sinner. I can’t stand in that light, but with that glory, we can all avoid that death march to Jerusalem. Let’s stay here in this perfect moment. “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (verse 5)

With all the talk of Jesus’ suffering and dying, God made a point to show Peter, James, and John that he really was who he said he was. The person that you put your faith, the person you believe to be your Savior, guess what? I really am that person. I am true God and true Man here to take away your sins. I will do this by dying at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law. Yes, it’s true, but carry this moment with you. As you see me travel to Jerusalem, accepting that instrument of death, the cross, remember what happened on top of this mountain. You saw my glory once, and you will see it again – when I rise from the dead.

A cloud envelops them. A voice from the cloud says what they are starting to comprehend: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.” (verse 7). Although we don’t have Jesus’ exact next words, we have the content. “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” (verse 9) Jesus’ glory will not end in death, but will be seen again after he has risen from the dead.

Peter, James, and John had to come down from that mountain, but they never forgot what happened up there. Even after Peter turned on Jesus when he denied him on Good Friday, God turned him back around. All three men would continue to carry their crosses for Jesus because they had this glimpse of his glory. They knew that when they finally reached the end of their lives, they would live in that glory that Jesus had shown them.

You may not have a mountaintop experience like Peter, James, and John, but that’s why God recorded this for us. Seeing it in the Bible, hearing it, we know that Jesus is the Son of God, that he is truly God himself even if he is going to be killed, even if he is going to show us his mortality. With that brief glimpse of glory, we know that yes, he will go on to Jerusalem. He will die. But in doing so, he will conquer death as he will come back to life from the dead because he is God.

Because Jesus showed his glory, we know that following him is not a death march. As he was glorified, so also that glory awaits us. He gives to us life after death, a life to live in glory with him forever. His story, our story, does not end in death. If our God promises that and shows us that he can do that for us, then there is no promise too big for him to keep. Following Jesus is never pointless. He takes up life where there is death. We can’t do that, but he can and does. That is what his glory teaches us. That’s the glory that Peter wanted to stay in forever. That’s the glory waiting us.

This Wednesday, we begin the church season of Lent. It is a time of repentance and self-reflection, and you are probably going to get asked, “What did you give up for Lent?” Go ahead and answer that question, but I want you to think about what you won’t give up for Lent. You won’t give up on following Jesus. When the journey of following Jesus gets steep, when I think that I would rather do something else, when I think that the sacrifices I have to make for following him will never pay off, remember what Jesus showed us on that mountaintop. He is the Son of God. He bore the cross so that we would not only see his glory, but that we also would live in it. God will continually strengthen you to go up that mountain of following Jesus to everlasting glory. Amen.