

Seeing Greater Things: The Glory After

Mark 9:2-9 (NIV)

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 covered 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.

We jump in time with our Bible readings from Mark’s Gospel account. Jesus has been actively teaching, preaching, and healing for about 2 years now. Nathanael and the other disciples had no doubt seen hundreds if not thousands of miracles – everything from the healings of sicknesses, fevers, paralysis, birth defects, to the driving out of thousands of demons, to the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, to Jesus showing his authority over nature, calming the wind and the waves at the command of his voice, to even raising people from the dead! They had indeed seen greater things - as promised!

At one point while Jesus is entering into his final year of ministry, he and his disciples are making their way to surrounding villages for more preaching and teaching. Jesus uses the time on the road for a teaching conversation asking, “Who do people say I am?” After getting some answers that other people were saying that basically all centered around Jesus being some kind of prophet, Jesus gets more specific. He asks, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter speaks up for the group of 12, confessing, “You are the Messiah, the Christ. You’re God. You are our promised Savior from sin. You have the words of eternal life. With all the greater things that we have seen, of course this is who you are.” Following Peter’s confession, “[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31)

Wait a minute. That’s kind of jarring. After all the greater things we’ve seen, after all the healings, all the demons you’ve driven out, the people you’ve raised from the dead, you’re going to suffer, be rejected by our religious leaders, and then be killed?! You have authority over this situation, Jesus! You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. You don’t have to die. You shouldn’t have to suffer at all. How can it be that you have to suffer, be rejected, betrayed, and killed?

Not verbatim, but this was probably something similar to what Peter said as he rebuked Jesus for the very idea that Jesus would have to suffer and die. Jesus in turn rebuked Peter saying that Peter had only in mind human, worldly concerns and not the concerns and plans of God. “Peter, if you’re going to follow me because you believe that I am the Messiah, then you must deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Yes, you’ve seen me do greater things, but the road ahead has suffering and death.”

Aren’t we, in some ways, in the same spot as the disciples at that moment? We’ve seen greater things. That’s been our focus for the last 4 weeks. But the road ahead is one of suffering and death. Thinking of the structure of the church year, this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. It’s a somber day when we remember that the wages of sin is death and that we expect to decay and return to dust unless Jesus comes before we die. The Lenten journey continues the theme of suffering and death as next Sunday we see Jesus tempted by Satan after he fasted for 40 days. We will hear the opposition to Jesus grow as we recount the days leading up to his Passion. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ soul will be filled with grief and he will pray so hard that his sweat will be like drops of blood. Then one of these 12 disciples, one of these men who saw all these greater things with his own eyes, will break Jesus’ heart and betray him for money, handing him over to a bloodthirsty mob. We will see the darkness of that Friday as they strip Jesus, beat him, flog him, pierce his brow with a crown of thorns, hammer nails into his flesh, and lift him up on a wooden cross to die an agonizing death. After seeing all those greater things, we, along with other disciples, will watch God suffer and die.

Many of us are always optimistic about the future, that things will get better - new year, new future, fresh start. Even after a pretty hectic, crazy, scary start to 2021, things seem to be getting a little better. The COVID numbers are going down, vaccines administered is going up. But then there are other things that remind us just how broken with sin we and this whole world are. Because of the sinful world we live in, we know that people are still going to get sick and die. I might get sick and die. Although people’s racism and prejudices are having a spotlight shine on them right now, they aren’t just going away. Wars and rumors of wars

aren't going to suddenly stop. Earthquakes, famines, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, windstorms, wildfires, inversion – they aren't going to go away in 2021. We know that there is more suffering and death for us in the days to come.

Now that I've painted that cheery picture, how do we survive and get through such a bleak outlook? The temptation is to lose hope and give up on God, that the future is dreary and gloomy and will only get worse. What does God do to get us through?

In a time of similar darkness, of depression as they are learning explicitly that in the days ahead their Savior is going to suffer and die, Jesus holds to his promise that his followers will see greater things yet. So he takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain with him. "There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (verses 2b-4)

In this moment, they see a greater thing that they had never seen before. What was hiding veiled in human flesh, is fully revealed. Peter, James, and John know with absolute certainty that Jesus is really and truly God – not just another prophet, but God in the flesh. This was confirmed by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, together representing the whole Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, all the Scriptures prophesying the one-sided covenant of God who forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more.

The three disciples were at a loss for words seeing this greater thing of the glory of God. Finally, Peter broke the trance. "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) Let's stay. We don't have to go back down and head towards that suffering and death. I'm seeing a greater thing.

But this moment on the mountaintop was not meant to last, not at this time. Jesus wanted to show his disciples his glory as God so that they would know, even as Jesus went head long into suffering and death, that he was still all powerful God who is in control and has authority over sickness and demons and the authority to forgive our sins. Because you have seen Jesus in his glory as God, you know and can be confident that what comes next is according to the plan to take away your sins, no matter how dark or painful it gets on the road ahead. The same is true for us who know that there will be days of pain and suffering and death ahead for us as well.

This confidence during dark days is further bolstered when "a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'" (verse 7) God the Father spoke out loud so that Peter, James, and John would hear that Jesus' ministry of being our perfect substitute was proceeding perfectly. He was living perfectly in our place so that when his time came to die, he would carry our sins on himself to the cross as only the perfect God Man could do. His mission stands approved, validated. You will see the greater thing in these dark days ahead of the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world, your sins.

Then it was over. The voice stopped. The cloud was gone. Moses and Elijah were gone. It was just Peter, James, John, and Jesus. The greater thing of this glimpse of glory was done.

"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) Did you catch that? The three disciples had seen the greater thing of Jesus' glory as God, but they would see something even greater. They would not see only suffering and death. They would see God rise from the dead. They would see that God approved of Jesus' sacrificial and substitutionary death. They would see Jesus conquer death and crush it under his feet. Dark days were not all that was in the future. They would see God's glory as he rose from the dead. The suffering and death will not last, but the glory of God, the glory of his resurrection, the glory of his payment for our sins, will last forever ever.

Like the disciples, we need to know that all the bad stuff - the suffering, the death, the pain in our future - will not last forever. We will see greater things yet. We will see what is forever after - the glory of God, the glory of the resurrected Christ, the glory of Jesus that was only glimpsed on the mountain top. We will see the greater thing of glory ever after!

This is the hope that we have from God to get us through our current and future dark days of pain and suffering. This is hope that is meant to be shared with others to get them through the same dark days. We stand on this mountain top with those three disciples and know that this is our future. We will get to live what Peter wanted, to stay here in the glory of God. That day is coming. Seeing Christ transfigured on the mountain top makes certain that we will see the greater thing of glory ever after. Amen.