

Sermon – February 14, 2021
“Follow Jesus up a high mountain”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 9:2-9

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning. This has been a very interesting week with lots of events and happenings in our Charge to celebrate. Let me mention a couple. Several of us from Fairfields gathered via Zoom to share in a time of fellowship around our dinners on Thursday. We had a blessed time of fellowship and it was great to enjoy the company of others. I want to thank all who tried to join us, and I need to mention that Richard and Jill Davis worked really hard and were successful with getting connected and Zooming along. It was a blessing to have time to talk, laugh, and share with people once again. I would also like to praise God that once again the COVID Contact and Prayer team at Fairfields has met and been blessed to pray over the needs shared with us. The Bible study at Fairfields and the insights into the Old Testament story that we are gaining continue to be a great blessing and a point of celebration. I would like to thank Judy Mooers for filling in for me last Sunday as well as all who helped last week while I was away and quarantined for possible COVID 19 exposure. We should all give praise for the health care that allows us to be tested and receive some assurance that we are not spreading the virus. Finally, let's celebrate the start of the Good News Club for the spring semester. Let's praise God for the three children who attended and continue to pray that more children's hearts will be stirred to join in the weeks to come.

As we begin our look at this morning's scripture, let me take a few moments and provide some background and context for this scripture. Six days ago, Peter has answered Jesus' question of who the disciples say he is by calling Jesus the Messiah, the coming one of God. Peter may not at that point have understood what the Messiah meant to God, but Jesus took it as insight given to Peter from God. Jesus has also told the disciples about his death and resurrection. They have not understood this part of Jesus' teaching, and it will take many more days of walking with Jesus for them to begin to grasp what his death and resurrection means for them, for Jesus, and

for all the people of the earth. Jesus has also told the disciples that “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Six days ago, Jesus’ prophetic words may have confused the disciples. Today he will begin to remove some of that confusion.

One last bit of background for context is a reminder that God once came to Israel on a mountain in the wilderness and made a covenant with them to be His people. On that mountain, Mount Sinai, God also gave Israel the conditions they must keep to honor the covenant God had made with them. The stipulations are called the Ten Commandments. In another mountain top experience later in Israel’s history, Elijah went up Mount Carmel to do battle with the prophets of Baal, and God sent fire down to consume Elijah’s sacrifice. God did this to make known to Israel that the LORD is the true God and not a false god made by the hands of men. So, any time God summons people in Israel to a mountain top, we can expect that God is planning to reveal to them something new about what it means for them to be a people in covenant with God. An early morning trip up a high mountain with Jesus is not a hike for exercise or a time for developing closer relationships with a few chosen disciples. It is a time when we should expect new revelation from God.

I like the way Mark does not describe the trip up the mountain. He also does not comment on the sunrise or beautiful vista our climbers may have enjoyed. What he does tell us, as I read this text, is that as soon as they crest the summit, Jesus is transformed. He becomes a source of light. His clothes become whiter than any fuller on earth could whiten them. Something new is happening; something is being revealed to these three witnesses. As they crest the mountain top, they are caught up in a vision that relates to the one they follow, Jesus, whom Peter has just six days earlier declared to be God’s Messiah. Peter may not have understood what he was saying or what God’s idea of a Messiah is, but here on the mountain top these disciples are about to receive a new revelation about God’s chosen one, God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, the one they follow and today have followed up a high mountain.

Jesus has also recently told the disciples that some of them “will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Before their eyes, Jesus is transformed not into a mighty warrior as they understand a Messiah, but into a source of light. The one they have followed up the slopes of this mountain is transformed into something their words fail to be able to describe. Here is Jesus, suddenly transformed into one wearing white, one who is a source of

bright light. Their minds, like our own minds, struggle to understand what is happening. Here on the mountain, the king of the inbreaking kingdom of God is revealed to them. These disciples witness a bit of the glory of the coming ruler of God's new kingdom on earth. They are given a glimpse into the one who will come again in glory and power on the last day. This is no mighty warrior who will lead the nation of Israel to break off the yoke of Roman rule from their necks. This is the king of a new kingdom, the kingdom of God, a kingdom of all the people of the earth who have been redeemed from sin and death. This is Jesus Christ, the one they have left everything to follow, who now stands transfigured before them with the glory of his kingship shining around them.

Standing with the transfigured Jesus are Moses and Elijah who are talking with him. We do not know what their conversation is about, just that these two sources of prophecy about a coming ruler are present with Jesus, the coming ruler of the kingdom of God. Jesus' prophecy about some seeing the coming of the kingdom of God with power has been fulfilled with these three disciples' witness on this high mountain to Jesus' coming glory in God's kingdom.

Mark breaks this moment on the mountain that challenges our minds with Peter speaking. And from Peter's words, it is clear that what he is seeing is far from his understanding of who Jesus is and what a transfigured Jesus means. Peter offers to build three booths so that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah can remain protected on the mountain top. By offering to build them each a shelter, Peter makes these three equal in status. Peter has not yet grasped what this vision means, only that Jesus is a source of light. Only Jesus is the king of the universe. The others present are great men used of God to bring the kingdom of God forward in Israel's history, but Jesus is the one transfigured on the mountain. Peter's response here is most likely from the terror he experiences at the sight of a transfigured Jesus. That Peter can speak at all is to me testimony to his courage. And it may also speak to the ability that all followers of Jesus will have to approach Jesus as our king in God's kingdom. Six days ago, Peter called Jesus the Messiah, most likely thinking him to be some great military leader that was to emerge. Now Peter is not at all certain of what he has seen. He will need to follow Jesus longer to learn what God's idea of a Messiah, a Savior, a Redeemer is. This is a journey that we also need to take so that we may grasp who Jesus is and live our lives in light of that understanding.

Before Peter can take any of the actions he proposes, all of those on the mountain top are overshadowed by a cloud. We should be reminded of the cloud that descends upon Mount Sinai

that Moses went into to meet with God. This is the shekinah glory of God. This is a bright cloud. This is the cloud that marks the presence of God. And from this cloud comes the voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And with those words from God, everything associated with the vision ends and the three disciples are alone with Jesus on the high mountain. Only Jesus remains, as he was before, except now there are three witnesses to this new revelation about Jesus the Messiah.

I am surprised that there is not a question and answer session between Jesus and these three disciples. Instead, Jesus tells them to tell no one about the vision they have seen until “after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” When I read this scripture, I have questions like, “Don’t these men have questions? Are they not wondering what just happened? Don’t they need help understanding what they have witnessed?” And while all of these questions and more are no doubt upon their minds, they follow Jesus as he leads them back down the mountain to the valley below, back to the low places, back to where people live, back to where a cross looms.

This time on the mountain has been full of references to seeing. Think about what the disciples have seen: Jesus transfigured, a bright light coming from Jesus, Jesus’ clothes becoming whiter than white, Moses, Elijah, a shining cloud. Their eyes have been flooded with strange and unusual sights that they do not understand. And with all that they have seen, when God speaks, it is not to what they have seen, but to whom they are to listen. They are told by God to listen to His beloved son. Think about the past history of Israel. When Moses comes down from the mountain with the words of God written on the two tablets, words that cover the front and back of the tablets with the stipulations of the covenant between God and Israel, the people are told they are to listen to the words of the commandments being read. Now these three disciples follow Jesus down the mountain with the command from God to listen to Jesus, the Word made flesh. Jesus does not speak on the mountain top. Jesus will speak in the valley and his disciples are told by God to listen to him. This moment on the mountain is not about seeing but about listening, learning to listen to Jesus. We, like these three witnesses, are to be those who listen to Jesus.

This week, on Ash Wednesday, we will gather and take time to prepare our hearts to enter into the season of Lent. It is a time of self-examination, a time of repentance, a time of seeking Jesus. We mark this season by self-denial to help us remember the gravity of the season. We like Peter may be overwhelmed by the vision of Jesus with his face shining like the sun, his

clothes whiter than we can make them, and standing with Moses and Elijah. While this sight may overwhelm us, it is on God's command given on the high mountain that we should focus today and throughout the season of Lent, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" We should seek during the forty days of Lent to be those who listen to Jesus. How can we listen to Jesus? How can we listen to one who is in heaven seated at the right hand of the Father? The answer is to open our Bibles and let the living words of Jesus speak to us in new ways throughout these forty days of Lent. Let me encourage us to commit to read one or more of the Gospels during Lent, and, as we read, to stop and mark the words of Jesus. You can mark them in your Bible or write them in a notebook if you don't like to write in your Bible. Look at Jesus' words, and let them shape our thoughts as we journey through Lent. As we mark Jesus' words, stop and re-read them aloud so that we can hear them with our ears and not just see them with our eyes. As we hear Jesus' words, we should plan to capture any of them that resonate with our hearts, that speak to our lives at this time and hold them up in prayer to Jesus. Ask Jesus what these words mean for us today, in this time, in this place. I will plan to set aside some time in our worship services during Lent for anyone to share what they have heard Jesus speaking to them through his words. So, pick out a Gospel, and read, then reread aloud what we find Jesus saying, and then identify what words the Holy Spirit is leading us to hear fresh, and then pray about what Jesus is saying to us through those words. Mark is 16 chapters, Matthew 28, Luke 24, and John is 21 chapters. We can read any of these Gospels by reading one chapter a day for the forty days of Lent and take off Sundays and still finish reading a Gospel before Easter. Let me encourage us to pray about making this our journey through Lent with Jesus. Let us commit to listen to Jesus as God told the disciples by seeking Jesus' words in the scripture, by reading Jesus' words as found in one of more of the Gospels. Are we ready to follow Jesus? Let's start during this season of Lent by listening to Jesus.

Pray with me: Jesus, lead us up a high mountain and allow us to see a glimpse of who you are in the coming kingdom of God. Let us hear your words and hold them in our hearts as we journey with you down the mountain into the valley where the cross waits. Speak to us, Lord, that we may be those who learn to listen to you, and then go with you into your mission to all people. Open our ears to hear you speak to us through the scriptures. Come, Holy Spirit, and open our ears to hear and our hearts to be transformed by what we hear Jesus tell us. Amen