

## Mark 9: 2-9

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.

Mark 9 The Message (MSG)

**9** Then he drove it home by saying, "This isn't pie in the sky by and by. Some of you who are standing here are going to see it happen, see the kingdom of God arrive in full force."

### In a Light-Radiant Cloud

<sup>2-4</sup> Six days later, three of them *did* see it. Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them. Elijah, along with Moses, came into view, in deep conversation with Jesus.

<sup>5-6</sup> Peter interrupted, "Rabbi, this is a great moment! Let's build three memorials—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah." He blurted this out without thinking, stunned as they all were by what they were seeing.

<sup>7</sup> Just then a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and from deep in the cloud, a voice: "This is my Son, marked by my love. **Listen to him.**"

<sup>8</sup> The next minute the disciples were looking around, rubbing their eyes, seeing nothing but Jesus, only Jesus.

<sup>9-10</sup> Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. "Don't tell a soul what you saw. After the Son of Man rises from the dead, you're free to talk." They puzzled over that, wondering what on earth "rising from the dead" meant.



Superheroes are popular. The elements of the story of a superhero include:

- an arduous trek up a mountain;
- a tightly knit company of friends on a "**mission**" together;
- the appearance of other-worldly figures in **dazzling light**;
- the transformation of the hero into an equally **dazzling** figure;
- a command from a **powerful voice** from another dimension;
- a determined descent to **battle those other powers** back home.

So, who is this superhero? Is it Jesus?

Well, "no." And "yes." Inherent in the story of the Transfiguration is the promise of a kind of life beyond what is apparent to earthly eyes most of the time. Both Moses and Elijah, two figures whose passing's were mysterious, were believed by many Jews to be God's precursors of the end times.

- Because Elijah went bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:9-12) and
- Moses' grave was never found (he was buried by God himself in Deuteronomy 34:4-7), these two men of the faith were thought to be available for God to send back. God would send them to inform humankind that God's reign was at hand. It is no accident that these two appear with Jesus on the mountain.

They discuss that change already prophesied by Jesus (Mark 1:15) and as the two messengers disappear into the cloud (a sign of God's presence:

\*the word comes to the disciples: "**Listen to Jesus**," the only one left. Now Jesus becomes the divinely chosen precursor of the turn of the age.

The commanding voice: The word from the cloud, "**Listen to him**," is a reminder to pay attention to Jesus' reliable words. He will not be a superhero as we understand it, but He will lay down his life and open glory to many.

We have a story that reassures Jesus' core disciples and Mark's readers (including you and me) that Jesus' predictions of betrayal, death, and resurrection are to be trusted. The struggles yet to come for Jesus do not in any way diminish confidence in his promises or his predictions of resurrection.



The hero (Jesus) shines as a beacon of hope.

And, the commanding voice said: **“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”**

“This is my Son” is the **second** of three decisive acclamations of Jesus’ unique identity in Mark.

The **first** is at his baptism: Mark 1:11

The **third**, at his death Mark 15:39. In all three episodes the atmosphere is apocalyptic in the strict sense: revelatory. The curtain is drawn away from normal appearances, allowing us a glimpse of God behind them.

Of these epiphanies Mark 9:2-8 may be the most strange. It is the least public, farthest removed from the commonplace (9:2). Events are literally beclouded (9:7). Jesus -- he alone (contrast Luke 9:30-31) -- is “transfigured”: metamorphosed in raiment that is “dazzling white” (Mark 9:3). No one on earth looks like this: such radiance, is God’s very essence. Only those judged righteous “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Here Mark is dramatizing what the Fourth Gospel claims of Jesus: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”.

“This is my Son, the Beloved” (Mark 9:7). The speaker is God. In Mark no one else is designated “God’s Son.” Not Moses. Not Elijah. Not John the baptizer. None of Galilee’s other itinerant preachers or exorcists. Only Jesus is the beloved (*agapetos*) Son, as Isaac was to Abraham (Genesis 16): Jesus is “unique,” “one-of-a-kind.” A father’s love for such a son is fathomless, precisely because there is no other.

Jesus’ transfiguration is uncanny. Peter and his friends were terrified and tongue-tied (Mark 9:6). When we stand before God, what is a proper response?

What do you hear?

How do you listen?

What are your actions? We hear a lot of things in this world. How we listen is essential to our faith.

*The root challenge for Christian communities today is cultivating Christian faith and discipleship in a cultural environment that no longer supports or hears or listens to it. It is not so much a question of church and culture, but a deeper question of gospel and culture: what does it mean to live a life oriented around the gospel of Jesus in contemporary culture?*



*This question gets far less attention than questions of how to do church differently because in some ways it is harder to answer.*

*Are we listening empathetically to people's lives and stories, hearing their longings and losses and reflecting together on where the gospel connects with them. What is motivating our spiritual formation and discipleship in daily life through which the gospel comes alive in us and for our neighbors. Will we reorder our congregational life around learning the gospel story and living these practices, knowing that unless we listen in a deeper way, we have nothing unique to offer our neighbors or the world. How will our participation in church programs and activities allow us to be tracing the energy of the Holy Spirit among the people of God.*

*Are we willing to listen to God and refocus the congregation's life on cycles of listening, discerning, experimenting and reflecting at the grassroots. We need to seek interpretive leadership—shaping an environment in which people can make sense of their lives and world in a Christian way, by listening to Jesus. God is the primary innovator and leader of the church. In a secular age, we have lost sight of this. Many congregations have thus lost their source of hope. It is only reentering and reclaiming the deeper stories and practices of God's people in scripture and Christian tradition that we can discover a faithful future.*

**“Listen to him!”** (Mark 9:7). For the first and only time in Mark, the voice from heaven orders Jesus' disciples. This command recollects Moses' directive: Israel should heed a prophet whom the LORD God would raise up (Deuteronomy 18:15). In Jesus, God has done this; Israel's successors should respond appropriately. To what should Jesus' disciples pay attention? Presumably, everything in Mark that Jesus says and does.

Immediately it refers to God's design for the Son of Man's suffering and vindication (Mark 8:31), the adoption of cross-bearing discipleship (8:34-35), keeping mum about what has been seen until after the resurrection (9:9), and assurance that all proceeds according to the divine plan (9:11-13). These are the very things that his disciples find so hard to understand, to accept, and to obey (9:31-34; 10:32-37; 14:26-31, 50, 66-72; 16:1-8). As suddenly as it struck, the mountaintop vision fades: a handful of disciples are alone with Jesus (9:8).

1. *Who is Jesus, for us and for the world?* If Jesus is nothing more than an oddball Jew from antiquity, to whom does the church bear witness? If the church has so little to confess, why on earth are we here?
2. *Who, in fact, is the Son of God?* The devil tempted Jesus to self-reliance, political dominion, and civil religion (Matthew 4:1-11 = Luke 4:1-13). When last I noticed, Satan hasn't quit trying to seduce us.



3. *Are we listening?* Igor Stravinsky said, “To listen is an effort, and just to hear is no merit. A duck hears also.”

If this is true, how much more does it bear on Jesus’ commands? It is one thing to admire the Messiah; to obey him is something else. “Follow me” (Mark 1:17; 2:14). “Pay attention to what you hear” (4:24). “Do not be afraid, only believe” (5:36; 6:50). “You give them something to eat” (6:37). “It is what comes out of a person that defiles” (7:20). “Deny [yourself] and take up [your cross] and follow me” (8:34). “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (10:31). “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (10:44). “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone” (11:25)

