

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Mark 9:2-12

The Same Face

Can this be the same face? Can it possibly be the same face? Can it really be the same face we will behold in weeks to come as we go down this mountain again with Him? Can't we stay here with Him? Can't we stay with Moses, with Elijah? Can't we stay on the mountain? Please, Lord, down go back down there, to the hatred, to the persecution, to the, you know, what you just told us about before. Lord, don't let this be a reminder, don't let this be a preview, let this be the end, the glorious end. Let us remain here!

Oh, those words had stung at the foot of the mountain! Peter would have none of them. Foolishness, they were pure foolishness! But like a bad song, we can't get them out of our head. The event was tattooed on our brains:

Jesus had begun to teach us 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. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Such sour words, such bitter words, yet He spoke them so sweetly, as if they were the most beautiful words in all the world. He spoke them with an air of agony in His speech, yet had a glimmer of joy in His eyes. It was as if the words perplexed Him and pleased Him at the same time. It was as if they were both unutterable pain to Him and His greatest pleasure. But they were foolishness to us, pure foolishness! He was the Messiah! Why should He suffer and die? He was the Son of God! Who could possibly overcome Him?

Admittedly, this was not the first time He had spoken in such a way, but there was something about this time. There was a sense of immanence, of urgency. He spoke as if it were almost already happening. And then He insisted, He insisted that we go up the mountain with Him, for there was something He wanted us to see.

There is something about God and mountains. Perhaps it is that the climb gives one time to think, to meditate. Perhaps it is that one feels closer to Him on a mountain. Perhaps it is because what God reveals on mountains is to be shouted from the mountaintops. There has always been something special about mountains when it comes to God and His people.

Moses climbed a mountain—a terrifying mountain. The people shrank in fear and begged God not to speak to them, but to speak only to Moses, for that was a holy mountain, threatening destruction to all who approached it with unclean hands and hearts. God gave Moses the law there, and what a bloody law it was, so full of threats and blood and death! It was serious business. God gave it to be fulfilled. Taking a stab at fulfilling it was not enough. Good intentions were not enough. God gave it to be fulfilled, but, thus far, everyone had fallen dreadfully short.

Elijah climbed a mountain; he climbed a mountain for battle. Almost all of Israel had fallen from the Faith. They bowed to statues of stone and wood. They offered what belonged to God to demons dressed as gods. They persecuted the prophets and ridiculed the remnant. So God told Elijah to climb that mountain and do battle. And Elijah did. He preached against the priests of Baal, against the idolatry of God's people, and, in His grace and love, God gave Elijah victory, proving with fire and blood that He was the only true God, the God who crushes with the law, but also the God who beckons back His wayward children with good news of forgiveness, of deliverance.

Moses climbed the mountain to receive the law. Elijah climbed the mountain to proclaim God's Word. And those mountains, the Law and the Prophets, made up the Old Testament. And now Jesus has invited us up a mountain... *"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. 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."*

The Law and Prophets meet, the veil is lifted, and where before they had known only a coming Messiah through shadows and symbols, Moses and Elijah now meet Jesus face to face, the arrived Messiah, who shines with a radiance the world has never known, with the light of a thousand promises burning in one flame of fulfillment. This day is what had refreshed them in their tiresome labor, what lifted them up when everything else weighed them down. And now, with dazzling brilliance, Moses and Elijah meet on a new mountain, a better mountain, and see in all His splendor the one whom they foretold, proclaimed, promised so long ago. Oh, if we could only stay on this mountain! It was no surprise that Peter couldn't help but say as much. After all, that is what made Peter Peter: *"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."*

And for once Jesus didn't have to tell Peter to be quiet. *"Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'"* What a glorious day this was! The Son shines, the Father speaks! What could ever be more important than this? But, alas, this was not the finale; the most glorious day would instead be the goriest. This was an encouragement as the end yet approached, as the end awaited just down this mountain. The Father had spoken His approval at Jesus' Baptism, as He began His earthly ministry, and now He speaks it as His earthly ministry approaches its disturbing end.

And, *"Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. 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. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant."* As quickly as that, plain old Jesus was back again. Drunk as we had been with delight at the sight of His transfigured glory, at our glimpse at His seemingly all-too-often hidden divinity, this was a hot cup of coffee, sobering and saddening. Plain old Jesus was back and bidding us down the mountain.

Could that have been the same face? Could that possibly have been the same face? Could that really have been the same face that is now resolutely set on Jerusalem, on another mountain, on Calvary? Yes, it was the same face, the same face we will soon see covered with the venom of the Evil One and crowned with the twisted and thorny curse of our flesh. Yes, it was the same face, and we dare not forget it, as those white garments are stripped off His frail frame and gambled over by those who murder Him in our stead and for our salvation. Don't forget that face, because that is who suffers for you in the weeks to come, who takes resolute step after resolute step to your punishment, to your death, to your tomb, beginning this Wednesday. Today we say farewell to alleluia and hello to the horrific reality of our lost condition. But remember that face. Remember who goes to save you. God does. The Messiah does. The One who brings Moses and Elijah together on the same mountain and fulfills the Law and the Prophets. The One whom the Father loves. Remember that face, and see your own face in it, for His coming death is your death to sin, and His coming resurrection is your resurrection to a new life in Him, begun now, and realized in all its resplendent glory when you will rise to shine like that face set before us on this mountain. It is the same face. Amen.