

“The Portal to Glory”
Mark 9:2-13
February 9, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return again to our series in the Gospel of Mark.

And this morning, we come to a key event near the midpoint of Mark’s Gospel. [Edwards, 261]

And again, in our text this morning, we also come to the statement that caused the disciples in general – and Peter in particular – so much trouble. It’s Jesus’s statement that as the Messiah, he would suffer and be killed by the leaders in Jerusalem. And as Mark’s Gospel goes on, Jesus will continue to press this point, even as he reveals his glory more and more. [Horne, 133; Keller, 121]

With all that in mind, we turn now to our text: Mark 9:2-13.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{9:2} And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. ¹¹ And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹² And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, when we think of the direction you give us through your Word,

we take comfort.
Let your Word be now our joy and delight,
as we attend to it here in your house,
so that we would remember your revelation as we go from here, day and night,
that we might cling to it and follow it.
Give us that great blessing,
of walking in your ways, by the power of your Spirit
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:52, 54-56]

Introduction

Our text this morning is the story of the transfiguration: this key moment where Jesus's appearance was suddenly changed, and his glory was revealed.

This text tells us something about Jesus. But with that, it also tells us something about us.

And so, as we look at our text this morning, one thing for us to consider, that emerges from this story before us, is that: We long for glory ... but only Jesus can get us there ... and only through the cross.

We long for glory. But only Jesus can get us there. And only through the cross.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

We Long for Glory

The first thing we see in our text – the first reality we need to recognize in it – is that we long for glory.

And the kind of glory we long for shows up in several ways in this text.

First, there is the desire to be glorious ourselves – the desire to shine, in some sense. Jesus, we are told, was “transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”

But it wasn't just Jesus who was glorified. Moses and Elijah appeared as well, and Luke tells us that they too “appeared in glory.” [Luke 9:31]

Now, commentators debate here whether what's being revealed in the transfiguration is Jesus's glorious divinity [Edwards] or Jesus's glorified humanity [Horne, 135; Wright, 115].

But it seems to me that what's going on here is an interaction of both.

Jesus, Mark has told us, is the Son of God. And his divine nature is, of course, the source of glory. As the author to the Hebrews puts it, Jesus is “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.” (Hebrews 1:3) [Keller, 123]

But Jesus doesn't restrain that glory to his divinity. It passes to his humanity, and it's his humanity that actually shines here. And then, from there, his glory passes to others, so that Moses and Elijah shine too – receiving and reflecting the glory of Jesus in their own glorified human natures.

In Moses and Elijah, we see that Jesus glorifies his people. And on some level, we long for that ourselves. In so many ways, we too long to shine.

But we don't just long to shine ... we even just long to be among those who shine.

Peter's initial words reflect this: "Rabbi," he says, "it is good that we are here." Peter wants to be there. He wants to be in the presence of such glory. He longs to be surrounded by such glory.

And that too is a longing we so often feel ourselves.

We want to be in the presence of glory – as Peter did. We also want to be glorious ourselves, as Moses and Elijah were.

But then ... there's something more we long for as well.

C. S. Lewis gets at this in his essay, "The Weight of Glory." There he speaks of glory and beauty. He notes that glorious beauty is all around us, even in nature. We can get up early and see a beautiful sunrise. We can go out and behold so many aspects of creation, and there it is: beauty, glory, splendor, luminosity. "What more, you may ask, do we want?" Lewis writes.

"Ah," Lewis continues, "but we want so much more [...]. We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it." [Lewis, 42]

We want to enter into – to be surrounded by – glory and beauty – to bathe in it.

And a picture of that comes in verse seven. There, the disciples don't just see glory – but glory descends on them and envelops them.

The cloud described there is no mere fog. It is, as we'll see, the glory cloud of God. Mark doesn't explain that ... because he doesn't really need to. This cloud shows up multiple times in the Old Testament and it represents the glory and presence of God's Spirit. [Horne, 134]

Here, for a moment, the three disciples are absorbed into glory ... and in that moment ... we see something of what our hearts long for.

Because as Lewis notes, the truth is, "We do not want merely to *see* beauty [...] we want [...] to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it." We want to be enveloped in glory.

What does it look like ... when you long for glory?

Is it that moment where you look on some beautiful sight ... and it fills you with joy ... but also ... with longing ... some part of you aches ... because you don't just want to see that beauty ... you want to enter it ... you want to be absorbed into it ...

Or maybe, for you, there's a deep longing to be in the presence of those who seem glorious ... to just behold their glory ... as Peter does here.

Or maybe you especially feel that urge – that ache – to shine yourself ... to appear in glory like Moses and Elijah do here.

Where do you see, in your own heart and life, this longing for glory?

We long for glory ... but we often don't even know how to talk about it. And maybe Peter's kind of goofy response in verse five reflects something of that.

As one commentator puts it: "The sheer oddity of [Peter's] bumbling suggestion is itself strong evidence of [this] story's basic truth. Nobody inventing a tale like this would make up such a comic moment, lowering the tone of the occasion in such a fashion." [Wright, 114]

Peter struggled to even talk about his longing for this glory ... and we often do too. But still ... it's there.

And so our text has this mark of historicity, while also resonating with some of our deepest longings.

Why is that?

Well, the Bible tells us that we were made for glory and to live in glory, in God's glorious presence. Humanity was created, and placed in the Garden of Eden, where all was glorious, where man and woman were glorious, and where both lived their lives before the glorious face of God. We were made for glory.

But then we rebelled. We sinned against God's glory. And when that happened, we lost much of our glory. And we were exiled from the Garden of Glory – separated from the glory we were made for ... all by our own doing ... because we defiled the glory. In an act of moral evil and spiritual insanity, we sinned against and tried to overthrow God's glory.

And so, we were sent away. And at the door to that Garden of Glory, we are told in Genesis 3, God placed an angel – a cherubim – with a flaming sword ... to strike any who dared to return after what we had done.

We were made for glory. We long for glory. But now we are separated – exiled – from glory.

That's the first thing our text pushes us to consider.

Only Jesus Can Get Us There

But then the second thing we see in our text is that only Jesus can reconnect us with glory.

We long for glory ... but only Jesus can get us back there.

It's unclear to me how much we should read into Peter's offer in verse five to "make three tents, one for [Jesus] and one for Moses and one for Elijah."

And yet, whether it was Peter's intention or not, so many of the possibilities of what he could have meant reflect our flawed and ultimately futile attempts to grasp at glory ourselves.

Does Peter think that if he builds something good enough on that mountain, then he can have glory in his life ... the way we so often think that if we build something good, if we build a good life, or if we build a good moral record, or if we build a good career, or if we build a successful family – if we build the right thing, then we too can have glory? And yet ... try as we might ... we never quite get there, do we? Glory remains out of reach of our best efforts.

Or does Peter think that if he just admires and associates with the right people – with glorious people – if he just spends time with and is connected with people like Moses and Elijah, in their glory, then in some way, that glory will pass to him ... the same way we often seek glory-by-association ... but never quite receive what we hope for? Glory remains out of reach despite our best connections.

I don't know what Peter was thinking. But I do know that that's how we often think – we often think there's some way that we can grasp at glory.

And one thing that does – and one thing Peter does here – is that by such attempts to grasp at glory, Jesus is reduced to the level of other people. Peter, we should note, offers to make three tents ... sort of like a spiritual hall of fame ... putting Jesus at the same level as Moses and Elijah. We too, when we try to grasp at glory for ourselves, far too often treat Jesus as just one more spiritual guide, one more holy person to associate with, one more lawgiver to obey.

But the events of verses 7 and 8, as the cloud descends, as God speaks, and as Jesus then remains alone ... all point us to a different way to reach glory.

And to see that clearly, we need to dig a bit deeper into the text.

To begin, we need to see that there are multiple allusions here to the events of Mt. Sinai. There a cloud engulfed a mountain as the distinct sign of the presence and the glory of God – marking a connection point between heaven and earth – between God and his people. [Edwards, 262]

And that connection point, established at Mt Sinai, then continued with and transferred to the tabernacle, which was meant to be a portable Mt. Sinai, and later to the temple as well. And both of those places are alluded to here as well. [Jordan, 212-213]

In verse 7, Mark uses a verb to describe the cloud enveloping them on the Mount of Transfiguration which shows up pretty rarely in the Greek Bible. But two of the times that it does show up is first to describe the glory cloud of God filling the tabernacle in Exodus 40:25, and then again to describe the same glory cloud of God filling the temple in 1 Kings 8:10-11. By choosing that unusual word here, Mark is very clearly pointing us back to the tabernacle and the temple. [Edwards, 267]

Which means that when we think about the role of Jesus in the transfiguration ... it may be helpful for us to also think of the role of the temple.

But in the Bible ... what exactly is the temple – what is the tabernacle – actually for?

And when I think about the biblical role of the temple or the tabernacle ... I sometimes find myself thinking of a particular episode of the show *Doctor Who*.

In the episode, the Doctor, a humanoid alien, who has a combination spaceship and time machine, is traveling with two human friends: Rose and Mickey.

And in their travels, they arrive at an abandoned space station in the 51st century (3,000 years in the future), about two-and-a-half galaxies away from earth. And though the space station is empty, it's giving off *a lot* of energy – and they're not sure why. So they begin to look around. And as they do, they find in one of the rooms of this space station in the future ... an 18th century French fireplace and mantle. Now, the fireplace is up against the outer wall of the spaceship, so on the other side there should be nothing but outer space. But when they look into the fireplace, on the other side they see a little girl, who tells them that her name is Rennet and she is in Paris, France in the year 1727. Which is odd. After talking to the girl through the fireplace the three space travelers stand up and talk amongst themselves.

Mickey says to the Doctor: “You said this was the 51st century!”

The Doctor replies: “I also said this ship was generating enough energy to punch a hole in the universe. I think we just found the hole.”

The Doctor pauses and then says, “Must be a spatial-temporal hyperlink.”

Mickey looks at him and asks, “What’s that?”

The Doctor thinks for a minute and says “[I have] no idea ... [I] just made it up ... I didn’t want to say [it was a] ‘magic door.’”

Rose looks at them both and replies “And on the other side of the ‘magic door’ is France in 1727.”

The doctor looks around the fireplace and soon finds how to travel through it to France in 1727, and that’s when things start to get really weird. For the rest of the episode, they use this and other “magic doors” to travel between a space station 2 ½ galaxies away from earth in the 51st century, and Paris, France in the 18th century.

And the reason I bring that up ... is because the temple in the Old Testament was a bit like that fireplace on the space station. It was a place where a hole had been punched in the universe to connect two things that would normally be very distant from each other.

Since the fall – since Adam and Eve’s rebellion – God’s people have always known that a chasm now exists between humanity and God. A huge chasm. Yes, in one sense God is in fact everywhere, but in another sense, we are separated from him. If a 51st century space station 2 ½ galaxies away from earth is a long way from 18th century France, then the distance between a holy God and sinful humanity is even further.

And to bridge that gap ... to reconnect with his people ... God, in his mercy ... in certain times and certain places ... has created something like a portal – a “spatial-temporal hyperlink,” or a “magic door.” *He has, in some sense ... “punched a hole in the universe” ... in order to reconnect heaven, in all its glory ... with earth, in all its brokenness.*

That’s what God did at Mt. Sinai in a special moment in the life of his people, when his glory cloud descended on the mountain, bridging heaven and earth. That’s what God did in an ongoing way for his people, when his glory cloud filled the tabernacle and then the temple, creating a link between heaven and earth.

God was making for his people something like a portal – a “magic door” to his glory, in this broken and fallen world.

And that’s what Mark alludes to and wants us thinking of as we read his account of the transfiguration.

But here, as God’s glory cloud descends, it’s not about the mountain, and it’s not about a man-made tabernacle or temple. No – here the central feature of where God’s glory cloud falls ... is Jesus.

When the cloud dissolves ... it’s Jesus who remains.

When God the Father speaks, it’s Jesus to whom he directs their attention.

Jesus, fully God, and fully man, is the place – the site, the bridge, the portal – where heaven and earth, where God and humanity, most truly meet. And so he is the door through which we are able to access the glory of God that we long for.

As Tim Keller puts it: “Jesus is the temple and tabernacle to end all temples and tabernacles” – “Jesus is the bridge over the gap between God and humanity.” [Keller, 125, 124; see also Edwards, 266; Ferguson, 135]

There is no other door. There is no other bridge. There is no other site in this fallen world where heaven and earth – where God and humanity – so meet and connect. Jesus is the door, the portal, the bridge to the glory of God. And so if we want to reach that glory for which we long ... we can only get there through Jesus.

We long for glory ... but only Jesus can get us there.

Those are the first two things we see in our text.

Only Through the Cross

But then the third thing we learn in this passage ... is that Jesus can only bring us to glory through the cross.

We long for glory ... but only Jesus can get us there ... and only through the cross.

Where do we see that here?

Well, in multiple places, actually.

For one, the story doesn’t end on the mountain. Jesus, upon being transfigured, doesn’t just stay there. Instead, he comes back down the mountain. Because his work is not yet done.

By coming back down the mountain, Jesus is reaffirming what we saw in last week’s text, which is that his glory can only come to us through the cross. [Horne, 136; Ferguson, 137; Peterson, 268, 272]

And, as if to impress that truth on them, in verse 9, Jesus once again refers to the fact that he must rise from the dead.

And ... to rise from the dead ... one must, of course, first die.

And in response, the disciples' question in verse 11 may have been intended as some kind of gentle push-back to Jesus's words – implying that if Elijah would come first, as the prophet Malachi seemed to say, and restore all things, then there would obviously be no need for the Messiah to suffer. [Edwards, 274]

But Jesus answers them in verses 12 and 13 with two shocking statements.

First, in verse 12, Jesus seems to link the Messiah with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah – a link that would transform how one understood the role and calling of the Christ. [Edwards, 274-275]

But then, second, and maybe more concretely, in verse 13, Jesus turns to their question about Elijah. And as one commentator puts it, Jesus's words there about Elijah would have “sent a shock wave to Jesus' hearers.” Because there, Jesus spoke of a suffering Elijah – something the disciples simply would not have expected. [Edwards, 275]

Now ... the actual Elijah of the Old Testament faced many challenges. But he was never captured by Ahab. He didn't have to endure imprisonment or death. [Horne, 136]

But the second Elijah – the prophet who would come in the spirit of Elijah – John the Baptist – he would be captured. He would suffer. He would even be put to death. His enemies, as Jesus puts it, would do “to him whatever they pleased.” And what happened to him would be a foreshadowing of what would happen to the Messiah. [Ferguson, 140; Edwards, 275]

And in this way, this second Elijah really did “prepare the way” for Jesus, the Christ.

And just as the second Elijah – just as John the Baptist – suffered ... so Jesus, the Son of Man, would suffer.

But why? Why did Jesus have to suffer?

Well, as we said, with our rebellion, a door had slammed shut between God and humanity – between heaven and earth. And that door had been closed and locked.

And ... in a sense, the door couldn't just be unlocked.

It wasn't a door locked out of spite or out of self-protection. It was a door that was locked because such a massive moral debt had been incurred by those who had been cast out.

And in the same way that a person cannot just re-enter a house that they've lost in foreclosure without someone paying the debt that they owe ... humanity couldn't just re-enter the glory of the Garden of Eden until someone had paid the moral debt we had incurred which got us evicted in the first place.

Or think of it like this: When Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden, we read in Genesis 3 that a cherubim was placed at the door with a flaming sword. And humanity could not return to the Garden until someone had received the deathblow of that sword that humanity's sin deserved.

That's what stands between us and God's glory.

And that's one reason why the displays of God's glory in this text were so alarming to the disciples.

Mark tells us in verse 6 that the disciples were terrified when they saw Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in glory. Luke tells us that when the cloud descended on the three disciples, they were afraid. [Luke 9:34] Matthew adds that when the disciples heard God's voice, they fell down in terror [Matthew 17:6] These men knew their Bibles. And they knew that if they, as sinful humans, tried to re-enter the glorious presence of God, a sword of judgment still waited for them there.

But the shock of the gospel – the shock of Jesus's statement in verse 12 – is that God himself has come to earth, in human form, to receive that sword of judgment in our place. God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, would pay the debt humanity owed – he would receive the flaming sword of justice that his people deserve – so that they could safely re-enter the glory that God had intended for them from the beginning.

That's why Jesus had to suffer – that's why he had to go to the cross – to pay our debt. It was the only way we could reach the glory we long for – the glory we were made for.

We long for glory ... but only Jesus can get us there ... and only through the cross.

That's what we see in our text this morning.

Conclusion

Where do you see the longing ... the ache ... for glory in your own heart and life?

The Bible tells us that that longing – that ache – is a signpost, pointing us back to our true home.

A home which we have exiled ourselves from. A home to which only Jesus can return us – and even then, only through the cross.

That's what our text reminds us of this morning.

What then are we to do with that?

Well, it's actually quite simple.

We should listen to him. We should listen to Jesus.

In our text, God the Father speaks to the disciples. God speaks ... and of all the things he could say ... what does he say?

He speaks to them about Jesus. And what he says is: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

And, of course, that applied to the disciples, who were standing there, before Jesus, hearing him teach during his earthly ministry.

But it applies to us as well. Because Jesus speaks to us just as surely as he spoke to them.

The Apostle Peter made that point very clearly. In a letter he wrote later, to fellow Christians, Peter recalled the moment in which he witnessed the transfiguration – he recalled the moment in which he heard God speak from heaven. But then ... lest we think that that command to listen applied only to him and not to us, Peter wrote that we – meaning all Christians – we have something even “more sure” than the voice he heard on the mountain. Because Peter explains that we have the “prophetic word” in the “Scriptures” which comes “from God” himself. [2 Peter 1:16-21] Think about that. Peter is saying that the Word of God we have in our hands is even more sure than the word he heard on the mountain. [Ferguson, 138]

We have God’s Word – we have Jesus’s Word – to us, from God himself. And as the Scriptures set Jesus before us, God urges us, saying: “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

Listen to him, because he is the source of the glory we long for.

Listen to him, because he is the door – the portal, the bridge – to the glory we were made for.

And listen to him, because he paid the debt we owed so that we could enter into the glory that we could never have earned back ourselves.

And so ... we should look to Jesus, and listen to Jesus, and follow him where he leads us.

Because, as we do, through Christ and by his grace, we will share in his glory and come to rest in our heart’s true home: the Kingdom of Glory for which we were made.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Bayer, Hans. Introduction and notes to Mark in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Doctor Who. “The Girl in the Fireplace.” Season 2, Episode 4. May 6, 2006.

Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let’s Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.

Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.

Jordan, James B. *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1988.

Keller, Timothy. *Jesus the King*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.

Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.