

"They Came Down From the Mountain"

When I was on half dome last week in Yosemite, it was easy to look around, and see the glory of God's creation. There are few things more awe inspiring than sitting on top of a mountain peak like that and seeing for miles in every direction. It was just amazing and glorious. For Christians, such earthly glory should draw us to consider God as our mighty creator. In our passage for today, Peter, James, and John saw an even greater glory on top of a mountain more than anything Yosemite has to offer. For they saw the transfigured glory of Christ, not only as the creator, but also as the one who would be our savior!

And so we are going to think about glory today. Glory is obviously attractive. As Christians we look forward to glory. We look forward to Christ's return in glory to bring us to glory. But God's people have not always understood that glory would not fully come until Christ's *second* coming. At the time of the disciples, many were looking for glory to come right when the Messiah arrived. We see that Peter, James, and John were still figuring that out in our passage as well. And even among Christians today, people often don't understand Christ's glory as much as we should. And so as we look at this passage for today, I want us to consider the glory of Christ. That's a pretty grand and magnificent topic. But what better place to think about Christ's glory than with the passage of the transfiguration of Christ!

And so I'd like to begin by looking at the promise of glory found in this passage. This starts right at verse 1, six days prior to the transfiguration. That verse talks about the kingdom of God coming in power. And Jesus' promise here is in light of the previous verse where he talked about how he would come a second time with the glory of his father. And so basically this verse promises that Jesus will one day return in glory, and he describes that day as the kingdom of God coming in power.

And yet verse 1 makes a promise. It says that some who were standing right there with Jesus would actually see this kingdom come in power. Now clearly the kingdom of God will not come in its full glory and power until the Lord's second return. That's what the previous verse had just said in chapter 8, verse 38. And obviously everyone standing there in front of Jesus has since died. But Jesus' promise in verse 1 finds its initial fulfillment in the transfiguration. It's not coincidence that the transfiguration event immediately follows this promise by Jesus. Indeed, Peter, James, and John would see the kingdom of God come in power; they would get a foretaste of the kingdom's power and glory, here in the transfiguration. And that would not be their last foretaste either. Witnessing Christ's resurrection was another foretaste. The day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles was another foretaste. But certainly this transfiguration was the most immediate fulfillment of Jesus' promise that some of them would see the kingdom of God come in power.

And so that is what the transfiguration represents - it's a display of power and glory. Specifically, it's a bestowal of power and glory upon Jesus from God the Father. Remember the context from our last sermon in Mark. Jesus had been tempted by Peter, and effectively Satan, to forgo his mission of suffering. But Jesus had resisted that temptation. He then told the disciples about his two-fold mission: first he must suffer and die, and then he would come in glory. Then, just six days later, we see Jesus being bestowed with glory and honor in this transfiguration

event. It's as if the Father is commending him for resisting the temptation to forgo his mission of suffering. And yet as much as Christ is exalted here in the midst of his mission, this event was especially given to us the church to learn from and to encourage us. And so let's look more at the glory of Christ found in this transfiguration.

First, I'd like you to notice in verse 2 that Jesus went through some sort of physical transformation here on this mountain in terms of his appearance. Our translation in the pew bibles uses the traditional language of transfiguration. The word in Greek is "*metamorphomai*," which of course is where we get the word metamorphosis. So something about Jesus' appearance was changed and transformed. We can only begin to imagine how this must have looked. Mark describes it in terms of his clothes. He says that his clothes became radiant and intensely white. Don't miss how Mark describes this in verse 3. He says that his clothes turned whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them. Don't miss that subtle point. Mark says that there was no earthly way to make his clothes this bright. Matthew's account says that his face shone as bright as the sun! And so something other-worldly had happened to his appearance. And that's the point. This glory that is being revealed is something greater than anything that is in this world. Keep that point in mind when you think about glory - the glory of Christ far surpasses any sort of earthly glory.

The next thing about this glory I'd like you to notice is that we find Moses and Elijah showing up and talking with Jesus in verse 4. We're not sure how the disciples recognized who they were, maybe Jesus told them, but think about these two Old Testament figures. Why do Moses and Elijah show up here? What is their significance? Well, collectively they represent the Old Testament. Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the Prophets. Jesus himself will later say how all the Law and the Prophets speak about him; they all looked forward to his coming and mission. Jesus had already begun to make the case that the Old Testament scriptures demanded and foretold his mission of suffering for God's people. Now here, in the midst of his transfigured glory, we see Moses and Elijah coming before their Lord. We see them coming before the one who they themselves had looked forward to and pointed ahead to. And yet what a picture of glory this is. Elijah and Moses seem naturally in fellowship with Jesus. Compare this to the frightened and babbling disciples. Surely this was not the first time Elijah and Moses had fellowshiped with Jesus since they had left this earth. And so what a picture of glory we see here. Christ, the glorified Christ, in fellowship with the saints of old, the saints who had longed to see him, and had themselves come to the paradise of fellowship with their God and Savior. Part of Christ's glory includes him fellowshiping with the saints whom he has saved. Surely that is a wonderful delight for us, but it also a delight to Christ, that he can fellowship with those whom he has saved!

But if we think more about Moses and Elijah here, we can see an even greater significance with each. Think first about Moses. This transfiguration of Jesus begs us to think back to Moses and Mount Sinai, especially when we see Moses himself appear. The passage from Exodus 24 that we read earlier in the service clearly shows the parallels. Moses goes up Mount Sinai with Joshua where a cloud appeared and covered the mountain, which is described as the glory of the Lord resting upon the mountain. This cloud rested on the mountain six days and after that God spoke to Moses on the mountain from the cloud. Now, here with Jesus, after six days, Jesus goes up to a high mountain with Peter, James, and John, and a cloud came and overshadowed them, and God again speaks. But notice the difference. God does not speak to give forth the Law to his *servant* Moses. God speaks to glorify and exalt his *son* Jesus. God the Father declares, "This is my beloved Son. Hear Him."

And so though Jesus' transfiguration has many similarities with how Moses experienced God's glory on Sinai, there is this major difference. In Moses' experience, God was showing forth *his* glory. Moses was but a servant witnessing God's glory. Here Jesus is not just another human witnessing God's glory. Jesus is a recipient of God's glory and Moses is again here to witness this glory as it is bestowed on Jesus. Jesus, the God-Man, is the center-piece of glory here, not Moses, and not even the Father. The focus is on Jesus and his glory which comes from the Father.

In the Old Testament, it was quite an honor for Moses to go up to Mount Sinai and witness God's glory in such a way. Moses himself came down with his face shining temporarily. But Moses knew that he was but a servant. He knew that there would be one to come after him. He looked forward to Christ. Moses prophesied of the Christ saying in Deut 18:15, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear." Here God says on the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" Jesus is the one Moses himself looked forward to, possessing a far greater glory. Though Jesus' transfigured glory would leave him while he began his mission of suffering, it is ultimately an enduring, not a fading, glory. The point is, as we think about the significance of Moses appearing here on the mountain with the transfigured Jesus, we realize the promised Messiah has come in glory, a glory better than that of the Old Covenant under Moses. And the glory here is being bestowed on Jesus as the Messiah.

And so when we think of Elijah we see a similar significance. All the prophets clearly talked about a coming Messiah. But of Elijah, it was explicitly prophesied by the prophet Malachi (4:5) that he would come again before the great Day of the Lord. And so the Jews had been on the lookout for Elijah. In fact Jews today are still on the lookout for Elijah - for example, when Jews celebrate the Passover today they traditionally leave a chair empty at their Passover seder, a chair for Elijah, and even pour him a glass of wine at the table! My point is that the Jews, because of the Old Testament prophecy, were expecting Elijah to come before the glorious coming of the Messiah. For Elijah to appear here on the mountain while Jesus is transfigured clearly would bring this to mind to the disciples! It would clearly signal the glory of Jesus as the Messiah.

And so on this mountain we see Christ's glory shown forth. It is a glory that is beyond this world's glory. It is a glory that is bestowed by God the Father on the Christ. It is a glory that includes sweet fellowship with those Christ had come to save. It is a glory that is a working out of all the promises in the Old Testament law and prophets. It is a glory better than anything Moses or Elijah had seen, but it is a glory they both looked forward to seeing and had now seen in Jesus Christ. This is the glory of Christ and his kingdom, and it was seen on this mountain by Peter, James, and John.

But as quickly as this glory came, within a moment it was gone. Verse 8 uses the word "suddenly." Suddenly, it all went away. Elijah and Moses were gone. Jesus' appearance was back to normal. The voice from heaven no longer spoke. As amazing of an experience as it was, it was over. It was such an amazing experience that Peter had, in his own fool hearty way, asked if they could stay there, suggesting that they could make tents for Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. But within a moment, it was all over and they were heading back down the mountain. The promised glory and power from verse 1 would have to await a final fulfillment.

And as they head down the mountain, Jesus basically says the same thing. The message of this glory had to wait. Jesus commands the three disciples to not tell

anyone about the things they had seen until after his resurrection from the dead. Do you see what Jesus is saying? He is saying that it was not yet time for this picture of a glorious exalted Messiah to come. This is more of a prophecy and a promise than a present reality. Yes, Jesus inherently possessed this glory as the eternal Son of God. But he had come to earth on a mission. He had emptied himself of this glory and humbled himself in coming to earth to live like each of us. He had come to suffer. That's the key. That's what he's telling the disciples here. Jesus had to suffer first, then glory would come. The glory that the disciples so longed for would come, and in an even greater way, but it would only come after the suffering of the Messiah. Jesus had to suffer in order to bear our sins on the cross. But then glory would begin to be displayed, starting with the resurrection. Then this story of the transfiguration could be proclaimed. Then victory could be announced.

But we see the disciples confused here. Verse 10 shows us that the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was getting at. It says that they didn't understand what he meant about this rising from the dead. Do you remember the last passage we looked at in Mark? We saw Jesus telling the disciples about how the Messiah would have to suffer first, then die, and then rise again. Peter rebuked Jesus because that view of a suffering Messiah didn't make sense to him. It seems that it didn't even register to Peter that Jesus also promised a resurrection. It's as if as soon as Jesus talked about suffering that Peter had tuned out anything further. It's quite likely that's what happened for all the disciples, because here Peter, James, and John are confused about Jesus talking about a resurrection, almost as if this were a completely new concept for them.

But if you look at their follow up question, you can start to get a sense at what they were thinking. They ask Jesus why the scribes say that Elijah must come first. And Jesus affirms this teaching and clarifies what the disciples were asking. Jesus says that yes, Elijah does come first, and *restores all things*. You see, that's the confusion for the disciples. They thought Elijah's coming signaled a glorious restoration. They had just seen Jesus' transfigured glory. They had just seen Elijah come. Everything they had been taught by the religious leaders of their time said that this was the sign of the restoration of all things! And so they thought that this was a sign of imminent glory to come. They thought this event on the mountain was a precursor to immediate glory. But that's not what happened. Instead Jesus leads them down the mountain and tells them again about his mission. He must suffer and die. The disciples must have thought: how is the death of the Messiah consistent with what we just saw? Didn't we see Elijah just come?

And so Jesus affirms that Elijah must come first in verse 12, but then he challenges the disciples' interpretation of that. Jesus asks his own question: "How is it written concerning the Son of Man, that he must suffer many things and be treated with contempt?" You see the disciples rightly believed that Elijah must come first. They rightly believed that when Elijah comes it would signal the restoration of all things. But Jesus challenged how they interpreted those truths. They obviously understood Elijah's coming in part, but not fully. Jesus challenges their understanding of Elijah's coming by this question that he asks them in response. Jesus says, yes, you are right that Scripture promises Elijah's coming, but how does that fit in with the Scripture that also promise a suffering Messiah to come?

That was the problem with the disciples. They were not integrating their understanding about Elijah's coming with the Scripture that spoke of the Messiah's suffering. Taken together, they would have been able to see the two-fold mission of the Messiah. Elijah would come ushering in a time of restoration, which would

be fulfilled by Jesus. But this restoration would be to restore people's hearts and souls through the atonement of sin on the cross. Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross as the Lamb of God. He could only bring restoration to God's people if God's people were forgiven of their sins against God. And so Jesus does bring restoration, but he does it through his suffering on the cross!

Jesus confirms this by pointing to another amazing revelation. In verse 13 Jesus says that Elijah has already come, but that the people did to him whatever they wished. In Matthew's account, it says that the disciples understood Jesus to be referring here to John the Baptist. So Jesus is saying that Elijah had already come in the person and ministry of John the Baptist. And in Mark's gospel, clearly we see that as well. Mark has already painted the picture that John the Baptist's ministry had similarities with Elijah's ministry. For example, both Elijah and John the Baptist faced a horrible king with a sinful domineering wife - for Elijah it was King Ahab and Jezebel, and for John the Baptist it was Herod and Herodias. And now here Jesus alludes that John the Baptist had come in the spirit of Elijah.

And yet look at how Jesus again challenges the disciples' understanding of the coming of Elijah. They thought the coming of Elijah meant glory. They thought the restoration he would bring would be about earthly glory. But Jesus points to John the Baptist as fulfilling the Elijah prophecy, and he says, look what happened to him. In case you forgot - Herod imprisoned him, and his evil wife manipulated Herod into beheading him. John suffered and died in his role as Elijah, in his role to prepare the way for the Messiah. And so John fulfilled his role as Elijah in suffering!

Do you see what Jesus was doing with the disciples? He was challenging their interpretation of the coming of Elijah, and their interpretation of the Messiah. The disciples thought only in terms of glory. Jesus says glory will come, but only after suffering. John prepared the way for Jesus in a ministry culminating in suffering and death. Jesus would finalize this restoration also through a ministry of suffering and death. But Jesus' ministry would not end there. The humiliation of his suffering and death would break forth into the glory of the resurrection. At his resurrection Jesus would inaugurate the era of glory. The resurrection is the beginning of the proclamation of his glory. That is why Jesus' disciples had to wait until the resurrection to start telling the world about the glorious Jesus. But once the resurrection happened, they *had* to tell the world about the glory of Jesus.

And so the transfiguration of Jesus stands as a guarantee of Christ's glory. It's a guarantee that Christ will come again in beyond-this-world glory. And so now with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus we stand in a unique place. We stand in a place where Christ's transfigured glory is being proclaimed. His resurrected and ascended glory is being proclaimed. And yet we await the final fulfillment of his glory. We await his return when he will come in the glory of his father and his holy angels. On that day, his glory will not be but a glimpse. On that day, we will not have to leave his glory for the way of the cross. On that day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord. On that day, we will join with him in fellowship for all eternity, sharing in his heavenly glory. On that day every tear of suffering will be wiped away.

And yet it is not that day yet. We live in between the times. Already the transfiguration has happened. Already the resurrection and ascension has happened. But Christ has not yet returned. And so our life is both a life of glory and a life of suffering. We suffer now in this world, sharing in Christ's sufferings. But we also taste of Christ's glory as he dwells inside us by the Holy Spirit.

Let's think about that. You see one extreme can be to think that our lives as Christians already fully realize glory. We can mistakenly think that once we become Christians, we will never have any more problems. We can falsely think that we can become perfect in our sanctification in this life. We can demand that of others as well (and often we demand it of others before we demand it of ourselves). But that's what we call an "over-realized eschatology". That's a big word. Eschatology is the study of the end times, and the end culminates in heaven and glory. So, to have an over-realized eschatology is to act like the end times are already here in their fullness. It's living as if we only live a life of glory as Christians. But don't miss the fact of verse 9. Look at verse 9: the disciples came down the mountain. They came down the mountain. They left the mountain of transfiguration. They left the mountain where glory was shone. And why did they leave the mountain? They left the mountain for the way of the cross. They left the mountain to go with Jesus to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross. They went to share in Christ's sufferings just as Christ suffered for us.

And so that is now our life in one important aspect. We now are being called to live by the way of the cross. That's what we talked about in our last sermon from Mark. We are to pick up our crosses and follow Christ in the way of the cross. We do this because we too have come down from the mountain, so to speak. We do not live our lives on the mountain of transfiguration, but in the wilderness of the cross.

And yet the other extreme can be to think that our lives as Christians here and now have nothing to do with glory. We can live a defeated life. We can think that our Christian life is *only* about suffering. We can think that our sanctification will make no progress, and therefore make excuses for our continued sin. We can live our lives just barely clinging to Christ to preserve us in this age, thinking that we are just barely escaping the trials of this world. That is the opposite extreme and it is equally wrong. This is called an under-realized eschatology. But look back at verse 9; yes, the disciples went down the mountain, but they went down with who? *With Jesus*. And though Jesus went to the cross, though he went from there to suffer, how could they not realize the inherent glory that went with them. How could Peter, James, and John, not help but see that searing brightness of Jesus every time they closed their eyes. How could they not help but remember who they were with after this life changing experience on the Mount of Transfiguration! They were with this Jesus, this glorious Jesus. Even if they did not see his glory with their physical eyes, they surely could not help but see it with their eyes of faith.

And what an even more glorious place we are in as Christians, this side of the cross. For Jesus has been raised from the dead. The transfiguration is now able to be proclaimed throughout the world. And Jesus has ascended, not just to a very high mountain on earth, but to the place of infinite glory at the right hand of God the Father! And yet we are not alone. Though he has ascended on high, he is with us by his Spirit. He sent his Holy Spirit so that the glorious exalted Jesus Christ will always, always, be with us. This glory is so great, and it is so much with us, that Ephesians 2:6 can say that we are raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places! Do you see the significance of this? We *already* share in Christ's glory. We *already* share in Christ's glory. Already we are seated with him in glory in a spiritual sense. And already his Holy Spirit dwells with us while we remain in this world.

Do you see the amazing contrast here? One aspect of our life is characterized by the way of the cross and suffering. Another aspect of our life is characterized by glory. Do you sense the tension? You should. But it's a wonderful, amazing,

tension. Live in this tension. May the hope in this tension uphold you. You will suffer in this world, but may Christ's glory and grace preserve you.

You see, I mentioned these two bad extremes in understanding how Christ's glory is present in our Christian living. But I think the more common temptation is to make this world our glory. We can make our earthly position and status our glory. We can find our identity in our jobs, or in our marriages, or in our families, or in our house, or our possessions. These things can be our glory. Just think of the way we can parade these things in our lives. We can make these things the glory of our lives. It's not that these are necessarily bad things. But do you make them an idol in your life by making them your highest glory? You see, the transfigured Jesus tells us that there is a better glory than these things. There is a glory that is better than anything in this world. That glory must be the greatest desire of our hearts. And that is the glory which is ours in Jesus.

That is what the apostle Peter said in the passage I read earlier in the service. As he recalled the transfiguration he said that he was an eye witness to it. He referred to his testimony of this amazing event as a guarantee of glory. Certainly it is. But Peter said that we have an even greater guarantee of glory - all the prophecies found in the Holy Word that affirm this truth. This truth that as much as Jesus came to suffer and die for us, he is also coming again in glory. We live in light of that hope, even as we already begin to taste of that glory by his Holy Spirit. And so may we even live all our lives in conformity to his Holy Word. Amen.

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