

Preview of Coming Attractions

Mark 9:2-9
February 22, 2009

I.

Today's gospel reading gives us, as it gave the disciples, a preview of Jesus' glory as the Son of God. And, just as with movie previews, one of the purposes of today's reading is to make us more interested in the entire movie.

But the feature length version of this movie has not yet been released, and that will not happen until Jesus comes again in the full glory that we only glimpsed today. There are, however, some things this reading calls us to understand now in advance of that momentous day.

Let's look at what happened on the mountain. As Christians, we believe Jesus was fully human and fully divine. During most of his life on earth, however, people only saw his human nature. Outwardly, in terms of his physical appearance, he basically looked like most everybody else.

That all changed on the mountain, and there the disciples saw Jesus' divine nature. Jesus was no longer of this world, but of the heavenly realms of Moses and Elijah who were with him. The human Jesus was revealed as the godly Jesus, and the disciples saw a preview of his future glory.

The Transfiguration also marked a change in Jesus' earthly ministry. He ended his miracles and healing in Galilee, and began his final journey to Jerusalem, where the cross awaited.

We soon will take that journey with him, at least spiritually. During the coming weeks, as we cross the threshold of Lent, our biblical readings will chronicle this next stage in Jesus' life as he left the crowds behind and began preparing his disciples for what was ahead.

And we are called to prepare ourselves for what is ahead as we anticipate Ash Wednesday and the days of Lent that follow. Today's reading offers two perspectives to guide us. One is our responsibility to go up and come back down from the mountain, which I will explain in a moment. The other is to take seriously the words that came from the cloud.

II.

We'll start with the mountain. Have you ever noticed how mountains are settings for important events in the Bible? Big things happened on mountains.

Moses received the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai. Old Testament prophets spoke with God on mountains. A resurrected Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples on a mountain.

When the Bible tells stories about someone going up a mountain, get ready. Something is about to happen; a new revelation is in the works. You just know that God is going to do something or change something in a big way.

But those things that happened on the mountains were not the ends of the stories; they were the beginnings. None of those people went up the mountain to stay. They went up, encountered God, and then came back down—transformed in some way or another.

That's because even though God's glory was on the mountain, God's ministry is in the valley. People went up the mountain for revelation, and came down the mountain to serve humanity.

Today's reading follows that pattern. Jesus and three of his disciples went up and heard God's word. And each of them, in his own way, came back down to fulfill God's will. Glory on the mountain, ministry in the valley.

This is an example for us. And we apply it to our lives by recognizing that although Jesus and the three disciples walked up a real mountain to hear from God, we are called to climb a spiritual mountain on our knees, in prayer, meditation, and reflection. And as Jesus and the disciples came back down the mountain to live out God's plan for humanity, we are urged get up off our knees and go into the valley where God's people await.

And by valley, I mean the world where God's people live and die, where they prosper and suffer, where they feel joy and pain, and where they either know the Lord, or they don't. That's the valley, the world, where Jesus labored. It's where the disciples preached the Gospel and began to build the church. And it's where we are called to extend ourselves to each other through the church in the name of Christ.

We can't do that on the mountain. That's not where God wants us to stay, even though it might be tempting to do so. We might want to escape life's difficulties, and sometimes churches can encourage that with commendable programs that lead to spiritual mountain-top experiences. It might be more safe and comfortable inside the church's doors than outside. But those experiences should be the beginnings, not the endings.

William Blake, an eighteenth and nineteenth century English poet and painter once used two images that can describe the choices we have when we represent the church as a community of faith. One was the image of a cistern, the other a fountain. For the younger among us, a cistern collects rainwater for later use. And so a cistern contains, but a fountain overflows.

Unfortunately, there are many cisterns in the church. Some churches operate like social clubs, as private organizations that keep everything inside for themselves. Others, however, overflow with God's love and their abundant efforts to make the church known in the community.

I believe St. Thomas is in that second category, and I pray that during Lent we not only will practice our own individual Lenten disciplines, but also will think about how we, as a church, can take Jesus' glory from the mountain and share it with those in the valley.

This would mean that while we reach up to God in our worship, we reach out to each other in our common life. That's how we are true to our call as Christians. You don't go up the mountain to find the hungry and the needy, or at-risk children, or those who barely exist on the margins of life. They are down here, among us now, needing our help and looking to us for hope.

III.

The other important part of today's reading is its description of God's voice from the cloud. And it's important to note that God was speaking to the disciples. This was not a supernatural vision. God was speaking to real people in real time. If recording equipment existed back then, it might have been possible that this divine voice could have been preserved.

Think about how this experience probably affected the disciples. Not only had Jesus been speaking on his own authority and the authority of his miracles throughout the Gospel stories, but now we have God showing up in a cloud and saying, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

And no one could have misunderstood. The message was clear. God did not speak in parables or use metaphors. No Bible translator ever had trouble figuring out what God meant here. But do we always take God that seriously? Do we hear what the disciples heard? Does the spiritual creator of the universe get the same attention that we give to the material parts of creation?

That's an interesting question, especially as Ash Wednesday is only three days away. What can we learn from today's Gospel that might help us in the time ahead? How can this reading be a guide as we prepare for the observance of a holy Lent?

The answer is not that hard. We are called to listen to Jesus, just as God told us. But for most of us it is easier said than done. How many times have we said to our children, "Are you listening to me?" I wonder how many times God has looked down at humanity, and asked the same thing.

Many of us are beginning to think of our Lenten disciplines. We're going to give up something, or do something that we are not yet doing. For those of you who still are undecided, I would like to suggest that seriously listening to Jesus might be a good plan for Lent.

But I don't recommend listening to Jesus as a Lenten discipline and not being serious about it. Sometimes we do something for Lent, and define our commitment in a way that gives us some wiggle room. Sometimes there is a catch in what we say we are going to do.

I recall the story about fellow who moved to a new town in Ireland. Each day he visited the local pub and ordered three pints of good Irish ale. After a few weeks the bartender asked if there was any significance to this daily ritual.

The man explained that he had two brothers who had moved away; one to England and one to the United States. Before they left they made a pact that each day they would visit a pub wherever they were, and order three pints to remember each other.

Well, one day the fellow came in and ordered only two pints, and this went on for a few days. Thinking the worst, the bartender asked if anything had happened with his brothers. The Irishman said his brothers were fine, and the bartender asked why he only ordered two pints.

The fellow smiled, and replied, "I'm still having pints for my two brothers, but as for myself I've given up drinking for Lent."

That would not be a good way to approach a commitment to listen to Jesus. We cannot allow ourselves any escape hatches. If we really want to hear Jesus, then our commitment to it must be with all of our heart, and all of our mind. It must be total.

There are several ways to do this. We might consider some combination of reading the Bible, or listening to others as we gather for fellowship, or prayer and worship in church, or seeking Jesus in silence and meditation, or some combination of them.

And there are others. But prayer, worship, and study of the Bible are time-tested and true ways to hear our Lord through the Holy Spirit, and they can get you started on the rest. We don't have to re-invent the wheel in order to have a meaningful Lenten discipline. It's already there.

IV.

And so, while the Easter story is the basis of our Christian hope in the next world, today's Gospel is at the core of Christian call in this world. We beheld Jesus' glory on the mountain, and we witnessed his obedience as he returned to the valley and his destiny. And we heard about the voice of God reaching the disciples with a command to listen to Jesus, his Son.

These two teachings are our guides. One proclaims that as we experience our own spiritual mountain tops, we cannot block out those calling to us from the valley. Our faith tells us to leave the mountain and go into the valley, to follow Jesus' example, and to reach out to them.

The other teaching is an unalterable truth that strengthens our faith and enables us to live in the Spirit. It is at the foundation of our Lenten preparations, and it is what God told the disciples in words that span the centuries to reach us today with the same force and power with which they came out of the cloud. "This is my Son. Listen to him." *Amen.*