

## Mark 9:2-50

### *Introductory Comments*

1. This chapter includes some powerful illustrations that establish with greater clarity the soil quality of the disciples, and the distinctions between the disciples and the audience. It is centered around the glorious image of the Transfiguration, and is followed by a healing story and some stark lessons for the Twelve.
2. The Transfiguration is a story that is familiar to many, yet the way Mark uses it is striking. Along with the baptism, it presents one of the few instances in which the divine basis of the story world takes concrete narrative form: a voice speaks from the clouds, and, what is more, former religious leaders of Israel, Elijah and Moses, appear alive talking with Jesus. The close connection of the passage with Jesus' comment about the future coming of the Son of Man "in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (8:38) clearly casts the episode as a foreshadowing of that impending event and a confirmation of Jesus' prediction. Thus, the Transfiguration embraces both the opening of Jesus' ministry and its future cosmic culmination.
3. Outline of where we are in Mark
  - A. 8:27-9:29 – first Passion prediction unit
    1. 8:27-30 – Peter identifies Jesus as Christ
    2. 8:31 – first Passion prediction
    3. 8:32-33 – Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus rebukes Peter
    4. 8:34-9:13 – Jesus teaches: save life/lose life
      - a. 8:34-9:1 – save/lose; shame/glory
      - b. 9:2-13 – transfiguration
        - i. vv. 2-8 – on the mount: Elijah and Moses
        - ii. vv. 9-13 – down the mount: Elijah
    5. 9:14-29 – healing of boy
      - a. 9:14-27 – healing
      - b. 9:28-29 – need for prayer
  - B. 9:30-10:31 – second Passion prediction unit
    1. 9:30-31 – second Passion prediction
    2. 9:32 – disciples don't understand
    3. 9:33-10:31 – Jesus teaches: first/last
      - a. 9:33-10:16 – care for the least
        - i. 9:33-50 – receive children
          1. vv. 33-37 – receive child in Jesus' name
          2. vv. 38-41 – non-follower exorcises in Jesus' name
          3. vv. 42-50 – reject causes of falling away

## Questions and Read Mark 9 aloud

### Discussion Questions

**1. Does the Transfiguration provide new information that the audience didn't already know?** *Not really; they already know that Jesus is God's beloved Son; they already know that he possesses miraculous powers – he can still a storm with a word, walk on water, and multiply loaves and fish. The fact that his human form should momentarily be altered to a purer, brighter essence is not astounding. Only the living presence of Elijah and Moses expands the audience's understanding of Jesus by anticipating his role as the beloved son sent as the final messenger by the lord of the vineyard to the wicked tenants (cf. parable of the Tenants, 12:1-12). Jesus stands in the line of Elijah, Moses, and all the prophets as a messenger to this "adulterous and sinful generation."*

**2. If not for the audience, who is the Transfiguration for?** *None of the disciples were witnesses to Jesus' baptism, and although they have experienced most of his miracles, they have apparently understood little. Jesus' transfiguration, then, is primarily **for their benefit**. While the audience can affirm the truth of Jesus' saying in Mark 9:1 that "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power," for they have seen and heard those healed, the disciples still remain in darkness. Even Peter's affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah was immediately spoiled by his refutation of Jesus' words. But in witnessing the transfiguration, the disciples can no longer claim ignorance of just who Jesus is or the extent of his authority and power.*

**3. So how do the disciples do? What are their responses?** *They are afraid. The disciples' response is characterized by Peter's words to Jesus about building three booths. Regardless of whether Peter means to construct three permanent dwellings or just temporary structures for their comfort, his desire is clearly to commemorate and honor the occasion in some material way. In contrast to his rejection of Jesus the Messiah's words about the inevitability of suffering (8:31-33), this glorified Jesus in company with Elijah and Moses wins Peter's approval. He wants to honor what he has **seen**.*

**4. Throughout the episode, the Transfiguration emphasizes what is seen – the glowing of Jesus' clothes, the appearance of Elijah and Moses – and Jesus doesn't say a word. But at the end the voice says, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." What is Mark trying to say?** *The final command of the voice from the clouds, "Hear him!", forces the audience to reassess the apparent point of the episode. As stated above, the transfiguration to this point has emphasized what is seen. Surely, all these "sights" must be what Jesus meant about "seeing" the kingdom of God has come in power (9:1). Had the voice said something like, "Behold him," or "See him," or "Look upon him," this interpretation would go unchallenged. But in the passage where Jesus doesn't say one word, where the emphasis is overwhelmingly on*

vision, the voice from the clouds incongruously commands, "Hear him!" Mark's point is that understanding Jesus is not about what has been seen, but what has been heard, or what Jesus has been saying. And what Jesus has been talking about (and which he will reiterate in the chapters to come) is the way of suffering, the cross, and death. **In the end, the glorious vision may be what Peter and many others want to see, but it is the message of suffering that all must hear.**

**5. What does the disciples' question about resurrection as they come down the mountain (9:9-10) reveal?** *Once again, the disciples seem incapable of picking up what Jesus is putting down. When the three of them ask "what the rising from the dead meant" it not only reveals an ignorance that severely compromises their ability to follow Jesus' instructions, but it seems especially preposterous coming from these three in particular, for it was Peter, James, and John alone among all the disciples who were permitted to accompany Jesus to Jairus' house and see him **raise Jairus' daughter from death** (5:37-42). Why the narrator gave us that previous detail of naming the special disciples allowed to witness that earlier miracle now becomes evident. Of all Jesus' followers, Peter, James, and John had better reason than anyone else to know "what the rising of the dead meant" (9:10).*

**6. To understand the disciples' question in verse 11, read Malachi 4:5-6. Why do you think Jesus says that Elijah has already come in verse 13? Who is he talking about?** *The audience would have had no difficulty in identifying John the Baptist as the one Jesus is referring to here, who came on the scene dressed in garb like Elijah (Mark 1:6= 2 Kings 1:8). John's baptism of **all** of Jerusalem and Judea and the confessing of sins that accompanied it fulfils Jesus' claim that Elijah's function is "to restore all things" (9:12). The fact that John the Baptist was arrested and killed so soon after a massive repentance anticipates the point Jesus is making: If Elijah is "to restore all things" and "Elijah has come," why must the Son of Man suffer and be treated with contempt? As the audience has heard, the repentances that John the Baptist inspired were not sufficient to protect him from the pervasive evil of "this generation," and thus Elijah's restoration must also fail to guard the Son of Man from suffering and contempt.*

**7. Why couldn't the disciples cast out the unclean spirit from the boy? Jesus acknowledges a lack of faith: he chides the disciples themselves for their faithlessness and he exhorts the man to greater faith, once again demonstrating the necessity of faith as a precursor to healing. What does Mark want us to understand when Jesus says, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (9:29)?** *The reference to prayer – a rare topic for Mark – is a way of indicating that, if such exorcisms require prayer, and the disciples failed, then they must not be praying! In fact, the Gospel narrative bears out this implication. Besides the customary blessings of food or children, on a number of occasions throughout the story Jesus has gone aside especially to pray. These times are characterized by isolation: he always goes alone, or to a lonely place, and when he withdraws the disciples are either in difficulty (6:48) or are harassing him (1:36). With this backdrop, it's not surprising that they can't exorcise this demon (and later we'll also get to see how incapable they are of watching*

*and praying with Jesus in Gethsemane). Prayer in the Gospel of Mark is consistently outside the disciples' range of understanding or participation.*

**8. What qualities about the disciples does Mark 9:30-48 reveal?** *They still are incapable of listening and understanding what Jesus is all about (especially when it's the hard message of the Passion), they are interested in their own glory and status, and they want to control who is a part of the message. **What qualities does Jesus emphasize as being most important?** Being humble servants, welcoming the non-insiders and powerless, being committed to preserving faith in the midst of fires and trials, and embodying divine standards over earthly.*

*\*\*\*For next session, read Mk 10*