

Courage for Living

Mark 9:2-29 (ESV)

January 19, 2003

Life is hard. It can be frightening, confusing, and overwhelming. We need a clue to grasp its meaning, a key to unlock its significance; a hint as to what we are all about; a clear vision of truth and reality to give us courage for living. “And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.” The clue we need, the key, the hint, the vision of truth and reality, is exactly what we are given in Jesus Christ. He is the one who best tells us about the suffering love of God, who created us for himself, who sustains our every breath, who judges us in righteousness, and who redeems us as his very own.

Jesus Christ came and lived with us then in order for us to live with him for eternity. In the meantime, we face life everyday using our memories of his earthly ministry and the assurance of his eternal glory as a guide for our lives and our ministries today and as the basis for our hope for the life yet to come. It is what we know of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that gives us courage for living in the present and good hope for living in the future.

Today’s reading from the gospel according to Mark about the transfiguration of Jesus—this changing of his appearance from that which was taken as merely human to at least a suggestion of his heavenly glory—shows that Jesus is the clue, the key, the hint, and the vision of truth and reality that we need.

What is the point? Jesus is the Son of God. That is what the voice from heaven says. The same voice had said the same thing when Jesus was baptized. The author of this gospel said it in the chapter one, verse one. And at the climax of the story, the Roman soldier who crucified Jesus proclaimed aloud, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God? First, it means that God is. This has been questioned. Is there a God at all? To say that Jesus is the son of God is first to say that God is. This, in turn, means that the universe in general and human life in particular are not accidents or coincidences but are part of God’s good plan and intention.

Second, to say that Jesus is the Son of God means that God has not left us alone but has come to us to be with us. There are many pretenders who want to tell us about God. This is the one true picture we have of God: the Christ who willingly suffers shame, pain, humiliation, and death so that we might live.

Third, to say that Jesus is the Son of God is to say that Jesus best tells us not only about God but also about our own lives. There are many models for human life: parents, friends, teachers, sports figures, military heroes, political leaders. They are all flawed and deficient. Everyone! They may be helpful but they are also misleading. Yet, in the life of Jesus Christ, we find out more than anywhere else what it means to be human and how to be human: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Fourth, to say that Jesus is Son of God is to say that God has come to be with us in order for us to live with God. A million things work against this. The worst one is death. Death tries to steal us away from God and from each other. Yet, God has made provision in Jesus Christ to overcome even this final enemy.

The transfiguration was a preview of Easter for the disciples, perhaps for giving them courage for living until then. Jesus had told them plainly of his coming crucifixion and resurrection, and they would have nothing to do with it. In fact, Peter had rebuked him. Now, after his transfiguration, Jesus told them not to talk about his transfiguration until after he was raised, which indicates again that Jesus cannot be understood apart from his resurrection. So here, in the middle of the gospel, is a hint of what was yet to come, a glimpse of heavenly glory, a clue that the power of God in his son is more powerful than death.

What is the result of all this? We are set free from all the false powers that want to lay claim to us! Because Jesus Christ is the son of God, he is the center, the focus, and the reality of our lives, and he sets us free to love God and neighbor.

There are voices that tell me everyday that I am not good enough to be God's adopted child; Jesus tells me that he is good enough for us both, and that I am God's adopted child. There are forces that tell me everyday that they own and control me—forces of history, forces of society, forces of economics and politics, forces of deeply set personal destructive habits. Jesus says that those forces do not own me, that I belong to him, not to them, and that he unlocks the chains that bind me. There are fears and hatreds and overwhelming emotions that would consume me everyday. Jesus says that now he is the focus and the center and the reality of my life. He sets us free for life. This is at least part of what it means to say that Jesus is Son of God. He can carry us safe through the suffering of this life.

After the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son," then he adds, "Listen to him." Listen to him! Pay attention! There are two important things about this: First, Jesus had just predicted his own death, the disciples had refused to hear that, and then God said, "Listen to him." Jesus Christ is the suffering son of God. That is what his ministry is about. He cannot be understood apart from this. God in Jesus Christ takes on the pain, misery, sin, guilt, suffering, and death of the world,

to set us free from it. This is an expensive salvation. It cost God his son, his only son, whom he loved. God spared Abraham from the horror of this sacrifice, but did not spare himself. We have to listen to the word of suffering to hear the gospel.

Second, when God says, “Listen to him,” this is pointing right at us. We did not get to see transfiguration. We did not get to see Easter. Jesus has gone to heaven now, and he is not coming back until the end of time, Judgment Day. What can we do in the meantime? “Listen to him.” We cannot see him. We cannot touch him. But we do have his words; we do have his gospel. We do have the entire scriptural record of God’s love for humanity. We can listen to him.

As part of transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared—the law and the prophets. The disciples wanted to build a little shelter and stay there forever, to capture the moment. But the voice said, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him!” He is more important than Moses or Elijah. “And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them, but Jesus only.” “Jesus only” is the only Son of God. “Jesus only” is all we need in life and death. “Jesus only” is not physically present with us but is with us just as truly and just as powerfully in his word, the gospel, which is why we come here every week to read, preach, and hear it.

What happens next? They come off the mountain of glory and enter the deep valley of human need. This is a pattern for the Christian life: we gather here to worship and to hear the word, then we go out to work at our homes, jobs, and schools, and at mission and evangelism. There are two kinds of need demonstrated in the valley, one obvious, the other less obvious but more dangerous.

The first need is the affliction of the young boy. Jesus says, “Bring him to me.” What a wonderful invitation, the final answer to human need and affliction. Bring them to Jesus. This is what evangelism is all about, bringing people here, to Jesus. This particular child was possessed by a spirit and had symptoms similar to epilepsy. We may not talk much about possession today. Our generation seems more consumed by our obsessions: addictions, chemical and otherwise; compulsions, where people’s lives seem out of their own control; hatreds and fears, misunderstandings and racisms, and on and on.

Part of the good news is that Jesus Christ becomes the new focus, the new center, the new passion of our lives, and he is powerful enough to take away all of these afflictions, even when nothing else can. Does that sound naive? There are examples throughout history of people’s lives being turned around. One of our favorite hymns, “Amazing Grace,” was written by John Newton. It is all the more remarkable when we realize that he had been an alcoholic, a pirate, and the captain of a slave-trading ship! This is a man whose life was turned around by the grace of Jesus Christ, so that he left all of that behind! This same grace and power are available for our lives in the word of Christ today.

The second need in the valley, less obvious but more dangerous, was the inadequacy of the disciples. Jesus had taken three of them with him. He left the rest behind. When he came back, they were arguing with the scribes and, what was worse, they had utterly failed to help the man with the afflicted son. Is this a picture of the Christian church? Do we spend our time arguing with the world and failing to help? I hope not, but sometimes, at least, that is true. Jesus was upset with them! “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me.”

Then Jesus helped the boy himself and told the disciples “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.” The disciples then and the church today have no inherent power but only the strength of relying upon God. For that is what prayer is, relying on the power of God.

Note the faith of the father. Jesus did not require the son to believe before he healed him. The son could not have done that! Who believed for us before we first believed? Maybe part of our mission is believing for those who cannot yet, for whatever reason, believe for themselves.

Listen to the word of God, the gospel of his suffering son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, crucified and resurrected, who alone absorbs and overcomes the lostness, sin, and suffering of human life. Life is hard. We need help. Thanks be to God that in Jesus Christ he gives us courage for living.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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