

**Sunday, 1 February 2016**

[Transfiguration- Jesus gets to define who he is](#)

## [Luke 9](#)

Before our Gospel reading we have an important question. At the beginning of Chapter 9 Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answer, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.” Then Jesus personalizes it. How about you- “who do you say that I am?” ... Jesus doesn’t want an objective assessment of the crowds- a statistical assessment of public opinion- as much as he wants his disciples to understand who he is. And Peter answers, “The Christ of God.”

Now we can say the right words without actually getting the right answer. If someone asks me why a person’s eyes are green, I can say, “DNA”, but that doesn’t mean I really understand what that means. There is probably a lot that is wrong in my understanding of DNA, but I can say “DNA” and get the right answer. ... My wife trained to be a “molecular biologist”. I can say the words, but I really don’t understand much about what her job was. I know pretty generally, but when she started taking in any kind of detail I was pretty lost. So when Peter says “the Christ of God”, does he really get what that means?

We probably shouldn’t be too hard on Peter. We can do the same thing. For us we say “Jesus is Lord”, but do we really get what “Lord” means? We say the right words on Sunday as we worship, but do we get what that means? Aren’t there bits you

want to leave out? Jesus, you are lord of my after life, but don't tell me what to do with my money. Jesus, you are Lord but don't ask me to forgive that person. Jesus, you are Lord of my life, but don't ask me to love that person I can't stand to be around. Jesus, I'm happy to have you as Lord of Sunday morning, but don't ask me to turn the other cheek on Monday. We are happy to have him be the Lord of love, but we want to take out the bit about him being judge. We say "Jesus is Lord", but sometimes our definition of what "Lord" means might be different than the definition Jesus uses.

For Peter, and for other Jews of the time, the Christ (the Messiah) was a great military leader. He was going to be another King David. He would unite the country, kick out the occupying Roman army, and reform the corrupt Temple and governmental systems. God's presence would be with the people in a distinct way and justice would come to the land. The wrongs would be made right.

We, who know the rest of Jesus' story say, "ya, but...". There are also pretty fundamental differences between the story we know (having read the rest of the Gospel) and the story Peter thought he was going to be a part of.

Right after Peter says "you are the Christ of God" Jesus knows the part of the story Peter is missing and so he starts talking about his death- "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." This would have rightly caused Peter's jaw to drop. Actually in other gospels- Matthew and Mark- this is when Peter starts rebuking Jesus telling him

he's got this messiah thing wrong- The messiah isn't supposed to die. And after Peter badgers him a bit trying to correct his understanding, Jesus finally has enough and has to put Peter in his place. Jesus turns to him and rebukes him saying, "get behind me, Satan!... You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things". Interestingly, Luke doesn't record that exchange between Peter and Jesus. The point of that exchange is that Jesus gets to define who he is, not Peter.

Right after talking about his own death, he starts talking about the cross disciples have to carry if they want to follow him. So not only is the messiah going to suffer and die, but so are his followers. This is not what Peter thought he was signing up for. This is not what they thought the messiah was about.

This is when we get into our Gospel reading. Jesus goes up a mountain with his closest disciples to pray. Mountains were a place of solitude to get away from the crowds, but they were also considered just a little closer to heaven. And while Jesus is praying, he changes. His face changes. His clothes are dazzling white. Whenever a heavenly being is described they talk about white garments and light.

Suddenly Moses and Elijah are with him. And what are they talking to him about? ... They were talking to him about his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. ... Here is this amazing sight. Moses, the one God used to give the Law to the people and who led them on an Exodus out of slavery to the Promised Land. And then there is Elijah, who is the prophet's prophet. He was the prophet the other prophets wanted to be. Together they represent the "Law and the

Prophets”- what we call the Old Testament. And what are these two men talking to Jesus about? His death. Or in the Greek, his “exodus”, which means “departure”, but with Moses standing right there we can’t help but wonder if there isn’t something else going on there. Is Jesus leading a new Exodus? Out of slavery to Sin and death to God’s kingdom?

Peter isn’t quite sure what to do, but it sounds like he’s hoping this moment will last and that Moses and Elijah will hang around, so he proposes to make some shelters. Sometimes we have these “mountaintop experiences”. Sometimes it is a worship service. Cursillo can be like that. Spiritual retreats can be like that. We feel God’s presence to be particularly powerful. Our faith feels stronger. All our doubts seem to drift away by God’s sheer reality. If you have had an experience like that you know how badly you want it to last. That’s probably what’s going through Peter’s mind. This is the kind of messiah stuff he was hoping for. Let’s hang out on the mountain and I can ask Moses all my questions about the law, and hear Elijah tell some stories, then we can all go march down to Jerusalem and take over. ... That’s not what this was about though. The moment wasn’t going to last and they were speaking to Jesus about his death.

Then someone else shows up. A cloud envelops them. It brings to mind the pillar of cloud the Hebrews followed by day; and the cloud that enveloped Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law; and the cloud that filled the Temple. And then they hear God’s voice, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" God’s voice doesn’t point to Himself, or Moses, or Elijah. God’s voice points to Jesus. And it tells the Disciples to listen to him. When Jesus

says “Messiah” it includes suffering, rejection, and death, “listen to him”.

The mountaintop experience doesn't last. Soon the cloud is gone and so are Moses and Elijah. We want it to last, but it doesn't. God often gives us those experiences to get us ready for something. From the mountaintop glory Jesus goes down into the valley to face a demon that is torturing a boy. Jesus is again on his mission. He is right in the thick of the human mess. It is an image of the incarnation. God comes to us, leaving the glory of heaven to be one of us, wrapping himself in human flesh. He travels to the valley of suffering and sinful humanity- A world infested with evil. Jesus leaves the mountaintop and goes to the valley to encounter a demon and suffering humanity.

The mission Jesus was on was so much bigger than Peter's mission for the messiah. Peter thought the messiah was just for the Jewish people and the land of Israel. But, Jesus was for all of humanity and the world. Peter wanted a military victory over the occupying forces of the Roman Army. But, Jesus wanted victory over the oppressive forces of Sin, death, and the demonic. Peter wanted to re-establish the kingdom of King David. Jesus wanted to establish the Kingdom of God. Peter's vision was so much smaller than the vision of Jesus.

Sometimes we don't get what God is up to. Peter didn't get why suffering had to be part of the picture for Jesus to be the messiah. When we encounter difficulties we don't get why life is this way. We don't see the purpose. It doesn't make sense in terms of the plan we have set out for God. Like Peter, our vision can be too small. Our version of God's plan for us might be

happiness in this life. God's plan for us might be for our holiness and then our happiness for all eternity. Sometimes our vision is too small. Sometimes we have to trust Jesus to lead us, not knowing all the turns in the road. We often have to trust Jesus when we don't understand what's going on. One of my favorite quotes is by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, "you have to live life forwards, but you can only understand it backwards". Could it be that when we look back on our life from the point of view of eternity that all the points of sadness, disappointment, and pain suddenly seems to have a different kind of value? They seemed pointless and unnecessary, but when we see the big picture they have been transformed to bring about some greater good. Our vision is small. God's vision is much bigger. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

The transfiguration is ultimately about showing that what Jesus is about is in line with what God has been doing all along, right from Moses on up to Elijah and now with Jesus. Even though it might not seem to make sense all the time, and it might not always meet our expectations of how we think things should go. We might not always understand all the bends and turns in our life, but we can trust that God has things in control and has a bigger vision than we do. AMEN