

Text: Transfiguration: Mark 9: 2-9

Focus (Content): Christ comes down to us because we cannot climb up to Him

Function (Goal): that the hearer would seek Christ where He is.

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Trouble in the World: In case you weren't aware: I will be getting married in 5 weeks, _days, and _ hours. My fiancé Rose and I are both very excited despite this being a very busy time for us. You might not be aware but planning a wedding, it turns out, is a lot of work. For example all the labor that goes into just the invitations. We were working on those a few weeks ago and we had all the invitations and the detail cards and the return envelopes and the folders to hold all those pieces together. And the big envelopes were addressed and stamped and we just needed to assemble everything. As we were arranging all the pieces we realized that the invitation cards themselves were just a bit too wide to fit nicely where they needed to go and needed to be trimmed. So I decided to make a card to lay over the invitations as a template and then trace the lines needed to trim each invitation precisely and uniformly. After about twenty minutes of messing with it I came up with a template that worked to my satisfaction. I thought I had a straight forward system to do the job properly and I found the whole thing very satisfying. When Rose and I sat down to start trimming I traced the lines using the template and she trimmed along them. It wasn't long before she pointed out that some of my precisely traced lines were looking a little curved. My template was not as precise as I had wanted. Eventually I had cast it aside and just use a pen, a ruler, and my eyes to draw the lines and that worked just fine. All the time I had spent on my template had been a waste. In my quest for satisfaction I had overcomplicated things.

I know I'm not the only whose ever done this, after all there is a reason that we have the phrase "work smarter, not harder". Humans like to make things complicated because we feel so accomplishment when we complete something that has a lot of complicated steps. Think about completing a huge jigsaw puzzle or a complex craft project. Rebuilding a car or remodeling a kitchen. We enjoy conquering tasks. This in itself isn't a bad thing but it becomes a problem when we try to make our relationship with God some kind of project or to-do list. Examine any human religion and you'll find plenty of projects and tasks designed to get you closer to God.

Lutheran Theologian Adolf Koberle tried to diagnose this problem in his book *The Quest for Holiness*. He said there are three different philosophies that humans use to create highly satisfying, overcomplicated religions. Think of each philosophy like a ladder that we set up and use to try and climb up to God or into heaven or at least get closer to some philosophical ideal.

There's the Ladder of the Mind, where you try to think your way into heaven. Scientology works like that getting people to quest after secret knowledge. Or think of the Atheist who believes scientific progress will solve all of humanities problems.

There's the ladder of Morality, where you earn your way into heaven by good

works. Mormonism and Islam run on this principle. Also, think about folks who try to use politics and social activism to change everyone's behavior and make the world a better place.

Then there's the ladder of the Emotions. Any religion that encourages meditation as a way to seek inner peace is climbing this ladder. Those people who base their faith on their feelings of fun, joy, and hope are trying to climb this ladder.

Of course all the really successful religions utilize all three of these ladders, which is part of the reason why Christianity is so widely accepted. We have something for you no matter which ladder you like to climb. You like doing good deeds? Go feed the poor! You like feeling stuff? Come to church and sing your heart out! You're interested in learning a bunch of things? You can spend a lifetime studying two thousand years' worth of theology! We have something for everyone! Just pick a ladder and start climbing.

The problem is, the real God of the universe isn't perched at the top of any of these ladders. People can devote their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge or righteousness or experience and they get to the end with nothing to show except everything that they didn't learn, everything that they couldn't do, and all the things they weren't able to feel. As Christians, if we try to climb these ladders to our God, eventually we will either look down to see how far we come and feel prideful at what we think we've accomplished, or look up and become discouraged by how far it looks like we have to go.

And so we arrive at a fundamental human question: How can we get to god?

Trouble in the Text: In our Gospel reading today, Peter seems to think that he has the answer to that question.

The text begins with Jesus and three disciples climbing, not a ladder, but a mountain. When they get to the top Mark tells us that Jesus was suddenly transformed. He metamorphosed right in front of their eyes. His clothes became blindingly white, so white they defied explanation and Jesus shown with the glory of God. And then Moses and Elijah show up. These two great men of the Jewish Faith appear on the mountain and begin to converse with Jesus. As if they had an appointment with Him. These two men who in their lifetimes had had the opportunity to speak with the Lord practically face-to-face have just come all the way from the afterlife to meet with this guy: Jesus of Nazareth.

This scene would make a very vivid picture for the three disciples: Jesus looked like Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who had shaped the history of the nation of Israel was standing there shining more brightly than the sun. This was it. Peter, James, and John had done it. They had unwittingly climbed their way up that mountain and straight into the presence of God. And it was terrifying.

Only a few people in the Old Testament had gotten anywhere close to the glorious presence of God and lived to tell about it. Usually being this close to God was a death sentence. God is so holy and we are so not. Usually for someone to be allowed

this close to the presence of the Lord they had to be purified through elaborate rituals and if everything wasn't done properly God was in His rights to strike you down in order to get you out of His holy personal space.

Most of us would be speechless at such a sight. But leave it to Simon Peter to interrupt this historic cosmic conversation and say: "Teacher, it is good that we are here. Let us set up three tents. One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah". Now it's hard to know why he said that exactly. Mark tells us he said it because he was so scared that he didn't know what else to say. Maybe he thought it was the hospitable thing to do for these distinguished guests. Maybe he wanted to cover Jesus in something like a tabernacle just to shield his eyes from the blinding light. Either way this statement by Peter does suggest one thing: he thought, or hoped, they all would stay right where they were. The Lord had dwelt in glory among His people before. If Jesus just stayed right here, as He was, Israel could be just like it was in the good old days. And having these two great prophets back from the dead was icing on the cake.

But no sooner had these words left Peter's mouth when suddenly a thick cloud covered all of them and a loud voice called out "This is my beloved son; listen to Him". And as quickly as it came the cloud had departed and there standing before the disciples was just plain old Jesus. By Himself. No longer dazzling white. No longer terrifying. Just their teacher. The disciples now had to make the long walk back down the mountain to live outside of the glory of God. Which was fine, because the glory of God is terrifying and confusing and we, as sinful humans, just can't handle it. If any of our ladders actually allowed us climb up to God, we would be in the same situation as these disciples and we would probably die from the experience.

Grace in the Text: We can understand that the disciples might have been a bit disappointed that they no longer had the means to climb into the terrifying brilliance of the glory of God. But let's take a moment to consider what actually transpired on that mountain.

The God that the disciples knew from Scripture was the awesome/terrifying God that spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai and swept Elijah into heaven on flaming chariots. This is the God that would kill any unclean person in His presence. This is the God who established the Levitical priesthood so that only a few people actually had to deal with the terror of being in God's presence.

And on that mountain, Jesus plainly demonstrated for these disciples that He and that Terrifying God were one and the same. But that wasn't the most amazing part. The fact that Jesus, as God, could be that terrifying wasn't so amazing. God was supposed to be terrifying. That's what you would expect from the maker of heaven and earth. No, the most wonderful and awe-inspiring thing about this Transfiguration event is the fact that Jesus, as God, could be not terrifying. The Voice booms, the clouds part and there is this little man, the Beloved and Only Son of God, who then walks back down the mountain to be with the rest of His disciples. He goes back down the mountain to live with the people, to heal them and teach them, to eat with them and walk with them and laugh with them. The same God from the Old Testament Scriptures who created the

Universe and struck down entire armies and brought calamity upon the wicked was here now and could be approached by anyone. He even went around bestowing the forgiveness of sins on people, something that God, and only God, could do. Because they could not climb up to God, Jesus came down to them.

And that's only half of it. On their way down the mountain, Jesus says to the three disciples that they are not to tell anyone what they had seen until He had risen from the dead. Not only were they walking and talking with the Lord God Almighty, but the disciples would soon see the most wonderful vision of the glory of God ever seen by human eyes. This Lord God Almighty was soon going to offer Himself up as a sacrifice so that all the sins of the world, past, present, and future, could be wiped away. There, on the cross, God would display His true Glory: the sacrificial death of His Beloved Only Son. After that was accomplished Christ would rise from the dead and ascend into heaven to prepare a place for his disciples in His Father's house.

Grace in the World: So Jesus came down to earth for the disciples and then ascended back into heaven. Where does that leave us? We have no ladders that can reach high enough. How do we get to God?

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has come down for us now. He has come down in the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God so that through the Holy Spirit we may come to saving faith in Him. He comes down in the form of our pastors who pronounce us forgiven of our sins in the words of absolution, and He comes down for us in His supper as His very own body and blood so that we may taste His saving work on our behalf. We have no ladders to scale, no mountains to climb. Because we cannot climb up to God, Jesus comes down here and now to us, not in power and might but in plain language and in simple elements.

But that is only for now. Because He is coming back and this time it will be with power and might. And because of the blood He has already poured out on us through His death, into which we have been baptized, we will have nothing to fear from Him and that is when we ascend to God, not by climbing a ladder but by being lifted up as though on the wings of eagles and we will meet Christ in the sky and live forever, purified, and basking in the luminous glory of God almighty for all of eternity.

So cast aside your ladders, they're not doing you any good, and worship God here, where He is to be found, because He has come down for us.