

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Fourteen – Mark 9:1-29

Mark 9:1 And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

What does Jesus mean? This is a mysterious saying, which on the face of it, seems to imply a Messianic triumph – the Romans out, Israel reunited, Jerusalem and the Temple the centre of the world. Jesus says a similar thing near the end of the Gospel of John, which John’s compilers take time to explain. For Mark, the saying sets up what comes next.

Mark 9:2

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone.

What mountain? It has been variously identified as Mount Hermon, which is not terribly far away, and certainly a high mountain – the highest, in fact, in all Israel – so high, that it can be glimpsed, on a clear day, from as far south as Mount Carmel on the Mediterranean coast; so high that snow can be seen at its peak in three out of four seasons; at over 3000 metres, it is a downhill ski destination!

Mount Tabor? Also known as the Mount of Transfiguration, located south of the Sea of Galilee, by the 300s, it was popularly identified as the site. Jerome, in translating the New Testament from Greek to Latin, which had become the dominant language, translated “where they were all alone” to “a high mountain, by itself.” Tabor, rising softly to 500 metres in the midst of a flat plain, seems an obvious candidate.

Which one? While tradition favours Tabor – a church commemorating the event was constructed in the 300s – the Mount Hermon proximity to Caesarea Philippi, where the last event was set, favours it. As well, in the days of Jesus, Tabor was a Roman military encampment, a function it served throughout Old Testament times, as in the account of Deborah and Barak.

Nevertheless, Mount Tabor is a wonderful place to visit, with a Franciscan church, built on the ruins of a 6th Century church, rising from the soft peak. The interior features a stunning Transfiguration mosaic. Outside are amazing views of the Jezreel valley, and on a clear day, the distant Mount Hermon. The only downside is the heartstopping taxi ride up to the top – and back down – from the carefree Bedouin drivers. Terrifying!

Why only Peter, James and John? The others are busy in the villages below the mountain, as we will see in the next section. It is also an interesting parallel – in Mark, there are three men who witness this revelation of Jesus’ true essence, and three women who witness the resurrected Jesus – the same three who by name witnessed the crucifixion.

Mark 15:40; 16:1 - Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.

Peter, James and John are among the first called; they seem to have special leadership roles – the inner circle of the inner circle. They are the three who witnessed the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter, they are the first three named in the lists of the Apostles. They are also the three asked to remain with Jesus in Gethsemane, while he prayed.

“After Six Days.” This chronological specificity is unusual for Mark, who normally transitions between stories with “immediately” or “and.” So it is a clue to pay special attention. What are we supposed to notice or remember?

We’re not ancient Jews steeped in the stories of the Old Testament. But people in the days of Jesus were. They would have remembered this; if not, the transfiguration itself would have reminded them:

Exodus 24:15-16 - When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, 16 and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud.

And there are more parallels:

- Jesus takes three disciples up the mountain; Moses goes with three named persons plus seventy of the elders up the mountain (Ex. 24:1, 9)
- Jesus is transfigured and his clothes become radiantly white; Moses’ skin shines when he descends from the mountain after talking with God (Ex. 34:29).
- God appears in veiled form in an overshadowing cloud; God appears in veiled form in an overshadowing cloud (Ex. 24:15-16, 18).
- A voice speaks from the cloud; A voice speaks from the cloud (Ex. 24:16)

Jesus is pictured, as he is in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount (Moses said, but I say), and as he is in the Feeding of the Multitudes (echoing the provision of Manna in the desert), as the New Moses. But he is about to be revealed as more than that.

Mark 9:2b-3 - There he was transfigured before them. 3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.

Dazzling white clothing is an element common to heavenly and angelic visions – the angels at the tomb being a primary example, as well as the angels at the Ascension, and the vision of Jesus in the Revelation. Mark’s description is particularly understandable by his audience! Jesus, appearing in this way, is now a heavenly figure.

Mark 9:4 - And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

- (1) Both were faithful servants who suffered because of their obedience, were rejected by the people of God, and were vindicated by God. The same thing will happen to Jesus.
- (2) The people expected a prophet like Moses, Israel’s first deliverer, to liberate them once and for all. Elijah was supposed to appear at the dawning of the end time and God’s ultimate redemption of Israel. Their return here denotes the debut of the final age – as Jesus had predicted at the beginning of the chapter.
- (3) Their presence with Jesus accredits him for his role as the deliverer sent by God. They are “handing off the baton.”

Deuteronomy 18:15 - The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.

Malachi 4:5 - “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

The overshadowing cloud that descends on them signifies the divine glory but also provides them protection. Exodus 19:9 provides the backdrop: ***The Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.”*** The command to listen to Jesus means that God is now speaking directly through him.

Mark 9:5-6 Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Peter is trying to contain that which cannot be contained – to make permanent the revelation being given to him, of the glorified Jesus together with the two great forerunners. In doing so, however, he is once again, as he did in the previous chapter, failing to have “in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Mark touchingly excuses his outburst.

If the offer to build three shelters suggests some desire to venerate the trio, Peter also mistakenly puts Jesus on a par with Elijah and Moses and fails to recognize his true rank. Elijah and Moses, great as they were, do not share God's glory with Jesus. Moses did not complete the task of bring the nation into the Promised Land; Elijah had to hand his ministry over to Elisha.

Mark 9:7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

There is no indication that this is a response to Peter's words – far more likely, it is a strong declaration of Jesus replacing Moses as the true deliverer, as in the Deuteronomy passage above (*Deuteronomy 18:15 - The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.*)

Mark 9:8- Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

Since Moses and Elijah do not speak but later fade from view when the voice from the cloud commands obedience to the Son, the message is that Jesus completes their work and surpasses them. The transition of prophetic power and deliverance authority is complete. Jesus, as the Son of God, now carries the full authority of that title.

Mark 9:9-10 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

Jesus specifically mentions the resurrection of the Son of Man as he descends the mountain with his disciples. Jesus has just predicted his suffering and death; The Transfiguration confirms that the suffering which Jesus will endure is not incompatible with his glory. But it does make the suffering all the more difficult to comprehend,

The fact that the disciples were discussing what "rising from the dead" meant, indicates that while resurrection was a belief held by many (not the Sadducees!), the precise time and mechanism was uncertain. Would Jesus rise immediately, after three days, as he'd said, or at the "end of days?"

Jesus' instruction to "not tell anyone" was probably because the full revelation of his divine nature would come in combination with his Resurrection. It is clear, particularly in Mark's

abrupt ending, that the understanding of the Jesus' full nature was for the disciples a work in progress.

Mark 9:11-13 - And they asked him, "Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 12 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? 13 But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him."

This mysterious passage seems to answer the puzzle about the presence of Moses (whom Jesus succeeds as Deliverer) as well as Elijah. In his answer, Jesus identifies John the Baptist with Elijah – but John, as Elijah, did not “restore all things,” as was popularly expected. Instead, once again, Jesus affirms that only the suffering of the Messiah can do that.

Mark 9:14-15 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

It may not be immediately apparent, but the odd phrase “they were overwhelmed with wonder” (*Greatly amazed, overcome with awe*) upon seeing Jesus is yet another reminder of the parallel story of Moses on Mount Sinai. When he returns after his time in the presence of God, we read this:

Exodus 34:29-30 - When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.

Mark 9:16-18 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. 17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

There are several things going on here, difficult to sort out. On the one hand, there's the contrast between this glimpse of heaven, and the disappointing reality on the ground. That's clear. What is unclear is what the disciples are arguing with the “teachers of the law.” What is clear is that neither the disciples nor the collective wisdom of the teacher of the law is helping the man and his son. Both are helpless. Only Jesus can help.

Mark 9:19 “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

Did Jesus expect things to change as a result of his transfiguration? Did he find himself longing for the Kingdom of which we just had a glimpse? Or is he frustrated with the disciples for failing the man? Or is he angry that rather than compassionately helping the man, they have devolved to arguments? A big lesson for the church!

Mark 9:19b-20-22 “Bring the boy to me.” 20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. 22 “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him.”

As in the past, the presence of Jesus triggers demonic activity. Jesus, rather than arguing with the demon – or the disciples – or the teachers of the law – interacts compassionately with the boy’s father: “Tell me about your son”

Mark 9:22b-24 - But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” 23 “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” 24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” 26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

This powerful passage, the very heart of the story, illustrates again the compassion of Jesus. Perhaps unlike the disciples, he heals the boy, not as spectacle, but out of compassion, an in respect of the father’s asking for his help, in the light of inadequate faith. The healing is complete; the boy can stand.

Mark 9:28-29 After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” 29 He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

For the complete treatment of this verse, see the sermon of January 23, 2022

Next Week: Mark 9:30-50

