Mark 9:2–9

**Other Lessons:** 2 Kings 2:1–12; Psalm 50:1–6; 2 Corinthians 3:12–13 (14–18); 4:1–6

“Seeing is believing.” We’ve most likely heard this at least once in our lifetime. It is a very common expression in our modern and postmodern society and culture. Of course we know that this statement is not entirely true. There are some things that simply cannot be seen, especially spiritual matter that is beyond our external senses and perception. Interestingly our gospel text for us today proves to us this very point. The faith that comes from seeing cannot truly see and penetrate the real essence of the spiritual reality, and certainly not the true nature of God and in this case, of Christ. The disciples saw with their very own eyes, but was there true saving faith in their hearts and mind? Did those 3 guys truly see a God who is loving and gracious and merciful? Indeed, the opposite is always true, that is, “believing IS seeing”, but the question then is how does one start believing if it does not come from seeing? Instead of seeing, hearing IS believing (as Paul himself says plainly in Romans 10). But that’s our struggle isn’t it? We don’t like to listen, at least, not the voice and word of God.

Nevertheless the transfiguration of our lord on the mountain is not merely a story about how majestic and glorious (and scary) he is, but it is ultimately a lesson for us to hear, to listen, to pay close attention to his word, and finally for us to believe. This may sound strange because Jesus doesn’t actually say much in this episode, in fact, only Matthew’s version record Jesus saying something directly to the 3 disciples (he tells them to get up and not be afraid). But the story itself does not stand on its own because we are told that this happened “6 days later” (same as Matthew’s version but Luke has “about 8 days later). All the gospel writers are trying to connect this story to something that happened just a week prior, which was the great confession of Peter.

This was probably the highlight of Peter’s career up to this point in his life. Jesus asked who people thought he was. Some thought he was a great teacher, some thought he was a great prophet, some even thought he was Elijah who was promised to return. And of course his opponents thought that he was possessed by evil spirits and a blasphemer of God. But then Jesus asked his disciples directly “who do you say that I am?” People may think whatever they want, but not his disciples. Having followed Jesus for quite some time now, they must know something. So Peter, on behalf of the other disciples, answered: “You are the Christ”. The disciples believed that Jesus was the promised messiah, but did they truly understand the answer, or was he just giving a standard Sunday school answer? The next part of the story is evident. Jesus tells them that he will suffer many things, and die, AND rise on the third day. But how did Peter respond? Peter took him aside and REBUKED Jesus for saying such silly things. Why would the Christ have to suffer? He’s the king of kings! Why would the Christ die? He’s God himself! Peter most likely believed in the general resurrection from the dead at the end of time, but he didn’t know nor believe that it must come from the Christ. So Jesus rebuked Peter, calling him Satan (not that Peter became Satan or was suddenly possessed by Satan, but such thought belongs to Satan, because it is contrary to God’s will). Jesus then instructs the disciples that they too must take up the cross and follow him. They must deny themselves and follow Christ. This must have weighed on them throughout the week.

So now they come to the transfiguration. Jesus shows his majesty and glory. For a brief moment the 3 disciples see the truth of what they confessed a week ago: Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Even so, their faith has not come to the right conclusion for Peter suggested to build 3 tents for them. Mark tells us that he said these things because he didn’t know what to respond. It seemed Peter thought that he needed to say something in view of the situation. But perhaps there was something more behind these simple words. What Peter is suggesting here is for them to stay where they are, in this wonderful miraculous condition, possibly also having this as a place of worship in mind. Perhaps Jesus had forgotten about the suffering and death and now skipped right to the good part. This is “good”, as Peter himself says, because who would/could ever reject Jesus if they saw such magnificent display of power? But his wish was not granted, no tent was built, no place of worship was established. His hope was short-lived, they still had to go back down to their ordinary life. It seems he still can’t accept what Jesus told them earlier, about suffering and death and resurrection.

Unfortunately that’s how we are also from time to time. We often like to think that we know everything that we need to know and therefore we don’t need someone else telling how to live our lives. Is that really true? For the most part, probably. But what about the word of God? Certainly there will not be an entrance exam when you arrive at the heavenly gates, where you are asked a hundred random bible questions to see if you have read it or not. Yet on the other hand, we must be reminded that “doctrine IS life”. The right understanding of God’s word directs and guides our church practices AND our daily living, which finally does lead us to life everlasting. What we practice in the church and how we live in the world should reflect what we believe.

But very quickly our rebellious nature kicks in and asks: “if I am saved already, if all my sins are forgiven already, if I am free from hell and eternal wrath already in Christ, why does it matter?” The bible is indeed all about our eternal salvation but it is also for us today. It is the future (what we have in Christ) that guides the present. Do you not know? A bad conscience can be seared (1Tim4:2). It is when the conscience becomes insensitive to what is right and wrong as one continues to test God and repeatedly sin and refuse to repent and ask for forgiveness. And then of course there are those who simply know nothing of what is right and wrong and just sin without even knowing it. Read again the parable of the sower of seeds. The seeds grow by the power and will of God, but do not think for one moment that the enemy is not also trying to snatch and destroy them. Some seeds never even get a chance to grow, some seeds have little growth because they cannot withstand the difficulties of this faith, and some grow but were choked by the cares of the world. Should this not alarm us? Or do you really think you can go living without the word of God, knowing it, understanding it, living in it?

But here from this encounter with the divine, Peter and the other 2 were enlightened, not by the blinding light of Christ’s face and clothing, nor the appearing of someone from the dead, but by the word that came from above: this is my beloved son, LISTEN to him. Listen, hear, learn, understand, guard, treasure his words. And this is why both Moses and Elijah appeared. Why them, why not someone else like David or Abraham or some other prominent OT figures? Because Moses and Elijah represent the entire OT canon, often referred to as Moses and the prophets. With these two main representatives of the OT books, we are shown that the entire OT is all about Jesus the Christ. And the voice from above confirms this: listen to him, don’t listen to your own voices.

Peter himself would later write about this experience and confirm that it is the word of God that sets them back on the right path, however unpleasant and difficult it may be. For he says in 2Pet 1:17-19 “**17**For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”, **18**we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. **19**And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts”. He was there and saw the glowing Jesus with his own eyes and yet he can say that there is some more sure, the word of God.

Hearing is believing because faith comes from hearing (Rm10:17). And these are the words that gives faith that we may believe: Jesus came to suffer, die, and rise on the 3rd day for our salvation, he came that we may have the forgiveness of sins, he came that we may not fear the cross to daily carry it with him since it is no longer a payment for our sins, but for self-denial, to discipline ourselves that we may not fall into unrepentant sins. And these are the words that strengthen faith too: take, eat, this is my body given for you; take, drink, this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. He invites us to partake of his gifts of forgiveness and life eternal. In faith and repentance, God helps us to look outside of ourselves and more toward him and our neighbor. In the forgiveness of sins we learn to reject sin for it kills. In the love of Christ, we learn to love.

Transfiguration Sunday is a perfect transition from the season of Epiphany to the season of Lent. Here we are get a glimpse of the divinity of Christ, but that is not where we are to stay for the life of the Christian is a life of the cross, but remember it is Christ’s cross because in baptism we have been united with him in death and resurrection (Rm6). And so on Wednesday we enter the season of Lent, which traditionally is a 40 day period of self denial and preparation for Holy Week. Giving up something for Lent is a good tradition, because when we have the urge for that chocolate bar or TV or some other habits, when we deprive of some of our bodily needs, then we may intensify our spiritual needs. And so I would also encourage you to read the Lenten devotions and also come to the mid-week services. The point is to get ourselves immerged in the word of God as much as possible in the company of believers. So then look to the word and there you will find the true light of life and salvation, which is the cross of Christ.