

Transfiguration of Our Lord B  
Ups and Downs of Following Jesus

February 11, 2024  
Mark 9:2-9

Our gospel reading is about an “up” time of following Jesus. We often use the phrase “mountain-top experience” to describe an “up” time – a glorious time when God may seem especially close and real to us. “Up” times when we feel really good, inspired, close to God. We may not be able to explain exactly what that feeling is, but it is uplifting.

Today is an “up” time for Christ Lutheran Church. We are welcoming some new members. I’ve also heard that the Call Committee might be getting names of candidates this week.

Immediately following our text, the disciples are in a “down” time. Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain. Jesus is no longer glowing. Moses and Elijah are no longer seen. They hear no voice from a cloud. The first thing they see and hear down from the mountain are the other disciples and some scribes are arguing with each other. Welcome back to the real world. Congregations also have “down” times. Sometimes members argue with each other.

The people are arguing because Jesus’ disciples aren’t strong enough to cast out an evil spirit from a boy. That’s a more literal reading of the Greek word.

We might think, “If it had been Peter, James, or John, the key disciples, they could have done it. They saw Jesus in all of his glory. Their faith must really be strong.

Later in this gospel, we again see Jesus with Peter, James, and John. Jesus tells them to sit while he prays. They fall asleep. He wakes them and says, “Are you not **strong** enough to stay awake one hour?”<sup>1</sup>

The nine were not strong enough to cast out an evil spirit, but the three are not strong enough to stay awake and pray when Jesus needed it most. None of the disciples are very strong in their faith or resolve to follow Jesus.

Up on the mountain, there must have been glorious feelings. Down in the valley, life isn’t so wonderful. Jesus says: “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?”<sup>2</sup> Jesus doesn’t even seem to like being with these people.

Maybe Jesus should have stayed up on the mountain rather than deal with these people down in the valley. Although, even up on the mountain, Peter, James, and John are terrified by the transfiguration. Peter wants to build tents or booths or, perhaps, shrines to the glorious event up on the mountain. God wants the disciples to listen to Jesus.

We are not the best listeners in the world. Shortly before the transfiguration Jesus had said: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter must have gotten angry at these words, because he rebukes Jesus. I don’t think that rebuking God is something we want to be doing. Jesus turns, looks at Peter, and rebukes him. Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!”<sup>4</sup> I’m pretty sure that wasn’t a complement.

Peter – and probably all the disciples – are not willing to listen to Jesus’ words about suffering and dying. We know that they didn’t hear his promise about rising from the dead. After Jesus is crucified, the disciples don’t wait around expecting a resurrection. They apparently all

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:37b-38

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9:19

<sup>3</sup> Mark 8:31

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9:33

went back to their homes in Galilee. Women come to the tomb expecting to anoint a body. Seeing the empty tomb was quite unexpected. They weren't good listeners.

How do you follow this command directly from God? How do you listen to Jesus? One way is obvious to me – you are here this morning. You've heard scriptures read. Although I am not Jesus, hopefully Jesus will use some of what I say to speak to you. Some of you attend weekly Bible studies where Jesus speaks to you through the Scriptures. Some of you have personal or family devotions where you listen to Jesus in scriptures and in prayer.

Down in the valley Jesus has the demon-possessed boy brought to him. The boy goes into convulsions. Jesus asks, "How long has he been like this?"

His father answers, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."

Jesus says, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes."

Immediately the father of the child cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

I believe that this father's confession and prayer is the central message of the entire Gospel of Mark. This writing is about people who believe in Jesus, and they are also people who need help in believing.

When the disciples are asked by Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah." He believes, but the next time Peter speaks, he is rebuking Jesus for talking about suffering and death. He needs help believing.

As I've already mentioned, Peter, James, and John see the glory of Jesus on the top of the mountain – "seeing is believing" as we say – but they fall asleep during Jesus' agony in Gethsemane – they need help believing.

We are to listen to Jesus and he says that all things can be done for those who believe. I believe that, yet I know that there are many things for which I've prayed that have not happened as I wanted. Many times the requests are not for myself, but for other suffering people. Their pains don't always go away. Life doesn't always get better for them. Sometimes those for whom we pray don't get better and they die. We pray for healing and the colds or flues or aches and pains don't seem to go away. We need help believing.

Sometimes we are up on the mountain and the glory of Jesus is all around us. More often we are down in the valley and the pain and suffering and evil of the world is all around us. Jesus is in both places.

The boy is brought to Jesus. He rebukes the unclean spirit (the same thing he had done to Peter earlier): "Come out of him and never enter him again!"<sup>5</sup>

The boy goes into convulsions and then stops. He appears to be dead. Jesus takes him by the hand and raises him up – the same word used of Jesus' resurrection. There is death and there is new life that takes place in the valley.

Up on the mountain, the disciples were too terrified to know what to do. Down in the valley, the disciples were not strong enough to do what needed to be done. All the disciples believed in Jesus. All the disciples needed help in believing. Jesus said earlier in Mark, "Those who are strong don't need a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 9:29

<sup>6</sup> Mark 2:17

When you don't have the strength to cast out demons or to stay awake and pray, then you know that you really need Jesus. If you see yourself as a sinner, rather than someone who does everything right; then you qualify to be called by Jesus to follow him.

Following Jesus has its ups and downs. It can lead to glorious mountain-top experiences when you are certain that you have been in the presence of Almighty God. It also leads down into the valley when you are surrounded by a faithless, demon-filled generation of people in need. We might even repeat Jesus' words, "How much longer do I have to put up with this?" Following Jesus leads to both places, because that's where Jesus goes.

Up on the mountain, no one was healed. No one confessed faith in Jesus. It was a wonderful experience for the three. Down in the valley, there was a healing. There was faith confessed and prayed for. There were lives that were changed. We may need mountain-top experiences to help us keep going; but it is down in the valley where our faith and our actions and the presence of Jesus makes a difference.