

Looking For Glory

Mark 9:1-13

Introduction

When was the last time you took a 'selfie'? Who knows what a 'selfie' is? A 'selfie' is a photo which you take of yourself and it's normally done with a phone so that you can see yourself on the screen as you take it. So when was the last time you took a selfie? [take answers] While selfies have become so ubiquitous that it seems people take selfies at any place and for any reason, normally people take selfies when they want to cherish a memory or hold on to an experience.

Some people take the 'selfie' idea further by going on holidays and then so falling in love with the place that they buy a holiday house or apartment at that location or even move there. In the church and through camping and conferences I have met people who have wonderful times at conferences and would love to hold on to these experiences because they struggle to see the relevance or reality of a relationship with God in their day-to-day lives.

This morning we're going to look at the 'mountain top' experience of Jesus with Peter, James and John and consider what it meant that Peter didn't just want a 'selfie' of this moment but wanted to hold on to this experience.

The Significance of This Event (vv. 1-8)

It should be pretty obvious that this is a special occasion. Here we have Jesus transformed in the blink of an eye before these three key disciples. "After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus."

Jesus is called in the Bible as 'Emmanuel', which mean 'God with us' and so Jesus is sometimes described as God in human flesh. Much of the time that Jesus

walked on earth he is recognised as a human who had the power of God active in and through him (which is particularly noticeable with miracles but is also recognised when he taught with great authority) but here we have a peeling back of the curtain of Christ's humanity and Jesus deity (his god-i-ness) shining through.

The imagery here is powerful in and of itself but the presence of Moses and Elijah is also important and adds to the significance of what's happening. Yahweh had appeared to Moses at Mount Sinai and revealed to him his law for his people, the Israelites. This is recorded in Exodus 24. In verse 12 of Exodus 24 we read, "Yahweh said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.'"

Likewise, in 1 Kings 19 we read that Yahweh also appeared to Elijah on a mountain, this time, Mount Horeb. We read of some of this encounter in verses 11 to 13, "The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

It can be said that in this situation that Moses represents God's law and Elijah represents the prophets. Some of you may know that a way of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, was to say, "As it is written in the law and prophets." By Moses and Elijah appearing we have representatives of the way that Yahweh had made himself known in the past standing with Jesus who now fully embodies Yahweh and so can perfectly make Yahweh known.

This representation is confirmed by God's declaration in verse 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!” Jesus is the One, as the unique Son of God, who embodies the will and power of God and thus can perfectly make Yahweh known to all who will listen.

What Peter Was Looking For (vv. 5-6, 10-11)

Having grasped something of the significance of what the transfiguration (Jesus being transfigured / changed in bright glory) means and represents, we now want to consider the disciples’, and particularly Peter’s, reaction.

The first thing we notice is the wonderful honesty and down to earth nature in Peter’s response and Mark’s recording of it in verses 5 and 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.’ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)” I’m sure I’m not the only one who relates to Peter here. Peter may not know what to say but that won’t stop him from saying something! Peter doesn’t just want the selfie of this moment, he wants to preserve this moment by moving in.

If we took this story simply like this then the application for us today would be that we’re not to seek to preserve mountain-top experiences beyond their appropriate length but instead we should be willing to go back down the mountain and face real life. That’s not a bad application as such but I think there’s more going on here.

We need to remember to always put stories in the Bible into their context and so it’s worth remembering what is the context of this story. In particular, what has happened just earlier at the end of chapter 8. In the second part of chapter 8 Jesus has been identified as the Messiah by Peter and so Jesus has taken the opportunity to explain that being the Messiah will mean that he will be betrayed, suffer much and be killed. We remember that Peter didn’t take this well and so rebuked Jesus only for Jesus to remind Peter to get back into line as a disciple and stop telling Jesus what to do. The final section of chapter 8, and so the bit immediately before this story, has Jesus saying that anyone who would want to be his disciple must surrender his or her life and show that Jesus is their king and ruler. So then, let’s consider what’s going on

here in the context of Peter's clear resistance to Jesus' declaration of the necessity of suffering and death.

Is Peter simply wanting to preserve the mountain top experience? It is certainly possible but it's maybe more likely that Peter is here trying to help his friend, Jesus, to avoid those unpleasant experiences which he had been talking about. Peter could be saying, "Why do you talk about the need to be betrayed, suffer and die. Look around you, here are Moses and Elijah. Strike! Look at yourself! Your shining brighter than lightening flashes! This is glory right here! What more could you possibly be looking for? Let's just stay here."

This possible thinking of Peter may also explain the questioning about Elijah. "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. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant." Jesus is talking about dying again (kind of a requirement for rising from the dead) and they're not sure what he's talking about. However, here's a possible way of showing Jesus that he might be mistaken, let's ask about Elijah, "And they asked him, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?'"

Why do the disciples ask about Elijah in the context of them not understanding Jesus' talk of rising from the dead? Yahweh had promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Malachi 4:5, that he would send Elijah ahead to prepare the way for the Messiah. There was a strong view at the time that the Messiah wouldn't even know that he was the Messiah unless Elijah had come and that Elijah would restore things for the Messiah (with this part being mirrored in Jesus' answer). If the Messiah was going to come along and make everything ready for the Messiah why would the Messiah need to be betrayed, suffer and die? Surely Jesus is wrong about this and so when Elijah comes along he will correct Jesus' mistaken thinking.

So then, is it possible that Peter is simply wanting to preserve a special mountain top experience and avoid returning to real life? Yes it is. However, is it possible that Peter, James and John are continuing to fail to grasp the necessity of

Messiah suffering and death and are trying to convince Jesus that there is another way to glory? I certainly think so. To help us see this more, let's look at what Jesus has to say to his disciples in response to their questions.

What Jesus Wanted Them To See (vv. 9-13)

I'll read verses 9 to 13 for us again:

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. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant.

And they asked him, 'Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?'

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? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.'

Having had such a dramatic declaration of Jesus' power, authority and glory, Jesus instructs his closest friends and key disciples, Peter, James and John, that they weren't to focus on this glory until he had risen from the dead (which also implies his suffering and death). As I just mentioned, it is in response to this reminder of Jesus' future that the disciples ask about Elijah. So let's look in more detail at Jesus' comments about Elijah.

First, Jesus does affirm that Elijah does come first to restore all things. However, if the disciples were hoping that the promise in the Scriptures of Elijah coming meant that Jesus was mistaken about his sufferings, then they obviously hadn't read the Scriptures well enough because it was also written in the Scriptures that the Son of Man (another way of describing himself as the Messiah) must suffer much and be rejected.

Not only were the disciples lacking in their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures by missing the references to the suffering of the Messiah, Jesus then goes on to correct their thinking about Elijah. Rather than thinking about a future Elijah Jesus says that Elijah has come already. Elsewhere it is recognised that John the Baptist acted with

the authority and spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17, Matthew 11:14). This of course prompts Jesus to point out another uncomfortable truth to the disciples. Look what they did to Elijah! The implication is obvious. If they killed John the Baptist who performed the role of Elijah then your probably pinning your hopes on the wrong guy if you think that Elijah's presence will mean that the Messiah can avoid suffering and death.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see in the account of the transfiguration of Jesus that while this is a dramatic demonstration of Jesus' power, authority and glory, Jesus didn't want this aspect of his character and being to be focused upon separate from the necessity for him being betrayed, suffering and dying.

There are times when it seems that the church feels embarrassed by the cross. It's one thing to accept that Jesus died on a cross because of mean and nasty political powers but some people find it hard to accept that Jesus' sufferings are a requirement for us to have a restored relationship with our Father in Heaven. Accounts like this about the transfiguration should remind us that Jesus was acutely aware that he would indeed suffer and die and that he accepted it and didn't see it as something to be embarrassed about either for himself or for his disciples.

You and I won't suffer in the same way that Jesus did. We're not God's Messiah. However, this section, combined with what we read in chapter 8 of the need to surrender our very lives, reminds us that we are not to be ashamed of the cross or surprised if we experience a measure of suffering ourselves as we live lives that show that Jesus is our king. Not only are we to avoid holding on to mountain top experiences when there is real life to be faced but we are also to accept and expect that real life will contain aspects of suffering as we follow the example of our Lord and Saviour.

[Enough as offertory song to follow]