

“Beyond the Preview comes the Cross, then the Resurrection” based Mark 8:31-34, 9:2-10  
Delivered on February 14, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Over the last couple of years, I have been subtly and sometimes not-so-subtly, emphasizing the church calendar in our services and church activities. Last year, we started something new. We were excited because for the first time in a long time, we had an Ash Wednesday service. That night, first, we got our ashes, then gathered for an inter-generational dinner, with our youth group and many of our longtime members here, and we devotions that involved two different kinds of paper.

In the first, we wrote our sins on a piece of paper that dissolved in water to symbolize our baptism. Then we wrote the things that tempt us to sin on a piece of paper that we lit on fire. When it lit on fire, the ash floated up in the air. It was quite fun and popular, and it showed the power of the light of Christ, as the ashes floated up, free of the temptations written on them.

It's hard to believe that this was one of the last in person events before the pandemic. Still, I remember a handful of you wondering why we were celebrating Ash Wednesday, because, well, that was a Catholic thing after all, and we're Protestants. Truth be told, many Protestant churches have long continued giving ashes, and the church calendar and Lent are not for Roman Catholics only.

This calendar is the wisdom of the church passed down to us, not in a traditionalism that binds us and breaks our faith, but it is given to us so we can live out our faith now, because of the living faith of those who came before us and led the way. The church calendar plugs us into the rhythms of scripture aligning our everyday life, with the story of God's love in the creation and redemption of the world. It is centered on the story of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. He is for us the way, the truth, and life by which we understand God's love. To do this, the calendar starts every year with Advent to anticipate God coming to be with us, and then we celebrate the incarnation, a fancy church word for the birth of Jesus at Christmas, to be God with us. Then comes Epiphany and the season after, bookended by the Baptism of Jesus and the feast we celebrate today, the Transfiguration of Jesus.

So, we see, the church calendar beckons us first to anticipate God in our life, in our world. Then we see how God enters into creation through the birth of a lowly child in a manger. Next, we are given some time to recognize who this child really is, so, we look at those moments in scripture that demonstrated who Jesus is. This is because Christmas tells us that our God was born in our human condition, but the Epiphany's season shows us why we believe this. It starts with the baptism, where we see Jesus, known only to his disciples then as a great human teacher who has called them, but there he is declared to be God's son.

Then the season after Epiphany closes with today, with the divine and glowing Jesus, in the company of Moses and Elijah, as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, as God come to be

the fulfillment of all that has been promised to the people. This is the picture given to Peter, James and John on the mountain, and it is the picture that we now take with us into the Lenten Season next week, where we will see what Jesus has predicted happen. We will see him go to Jerusalem, be betrayed and killed, and then he will rise again in this kind of glory.

But we have to be cautious not to get ahead of the story, as Peter tries to do. Jesus gives everyone a preview – He tells everyone around what will happen to him. Peter doesn't like what he hears about the crucifixion, and rebukes Jesus. 'This is not how it is supposed to be,' he says. Peter has his notions of how things should be if he were making the plan. And certainly, for him, the death of Jesus is absolutely unacceptable.

So, Jesus turns to everyone and tells them the hard truth, that he will go first, but everyone who believes in him is asked to pick up their cross and follow him. This may sound gloomy, but Peter got stuck on the passion prediction. It's only gloomy if we make the same mistake.

The promise of Jesus was that yes, he would be betrayed and die, but also that he would rise again. And so, six days later, Peter, James and John get a preview of that up close. Still, once again, Peter misses the point as he often does. He tries to preserve this moment, as if it is the pinnacle of what he will see – he wants to set up tents, make a dwelling – and he assumes that is why Jesus has brought them up, to build these tents. He speaks before he has the full picture and jumps to conclusions. But then the voice of the Father bursts through a cloud around them, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him.'

The first thing Jesus tells them – stop talking. This is his first instruction. Don't say anything about this – yet. You see, Jesus brought them up there in order for them to tell the world what they had seen, but not now when they would just be going down from the mountain blabbing about having seen a couple of ghosts. Instead, they are to remember this moment and speak it after the resurrection. That's when it will make sense.

Friends, living a life that is faithful to God is not about just a single moment we have, but it is about knowing the fullness of God's faithfulness to us and responding to it – not with big heroic actions that make us look good right now, while we neglect our everyday lives. Instead, it's about having our everyday lives, mundane and ordinary reflect our responsiveness to God. Faithfulness to God isn't about earning our ticket to heaven, but turning our hearts to God's love and mercy to accept salvation God gives to us. We live empowered by that grace to follow Jesus, to take up our cross, knowing Jesus has gone before us.

The church calendar is one tool we can use to align our lives, individually and as a church, to the rhythms of God's story of creation, redemption and action in our world. Our God is not distant, but immanent. Like Elisha, we follow Jesus knowing what we can expect will happen, knowing that the cross is coming, but so is the resurrection. And for us to follow the way of the cross is to find the resurrection.

So, be mindful of the calendar and let it shape your life to see the gospel truly as good news. We proclaim who Jesus is, as revealed in the incarnation we celebrate on Christmas, and on the transfiguration, we celebrate today, and on the resurrection, because Jesus – One with God as our Lord and still human as our brother – shows us the full human response to the saving love of God, which he has freely and unconditionally set out for us.

We receive the good news when we immerse ourselves in the truth and proclaim it—that God so fully and completely loves all of you, that God gave God’s own self, in Jesus Christ, the Son, the “Beloved” – and in this, God’s own being and very existence, has been pledged for you, and your salvation, your restoration, and your redemption. In Jesus, God has made unconditional love for you a very real thing, by sharing fully in your human nature once and for all. God cannot go back on any of this without undoing it all – the incarnation, the transfiguration, the cross, and the resurrection, which if God did all this, God would be denying God’s self.

Friends, the One True God shared in your humanity to live as you live in Jesus, and Jesus as the Word of God in our humanity, died for you because you are sinful, and because you are unworthy of him, and yet, in doing this, Jesus made you his own. He did this while we are sinners, without regard to whether we believe. Yes, God has bound you up in Jesus’s humanity, and tied you to God’s own self, so as to never let you go, for even if we refuse God and clutch our sins so tightly, that they drag us to the depths of hell, God will still love us.

That is why we repent. When we let go of our sins and turn to Jesus instead, when we believe that he is One with the Lord, the God of Israel, and our own Lord, then we accept the love of God that God so freely pours out for us. So, I say to you repent and believe in Jesus, who is your Lord and who is your Savior. From the beginning and to the end when all things will be made new, what Jesus has done for you, he has done for you as your God, and also, in his being a human just like you. It’s a strange mystery, but it is our truth.

Jesus has already acted on your behalf in the full range of human life – Everything. There is nothing which he has not shared with you – so your whole life is redeemed. Jesus acknowledges you before the Father as one who has already responded to God, who has already been faithful, and has already offered everything to the Father, all of which has already been fully and completely accepted by the Father. In Jesus Christ you are already accepted by God. This is why we are told to fully deny ourselves, because in Jesus we find our true identity and then we can take up our cross, and follow Jesus, to accompany him on the road of the cross, for it is also the road to resurrection.

This is the astonishingly good news of God’s unconditional grace that needs to be proclaimed. To repent and believe in Jesus, to take up our cross, is to be committed fully to him, not by looking over our shoulder to see whether God is coming after us to judge us. Instead, it means to look forward to the Christ we follow, looking ahead at his path, always looking ahead toward

Jesus, in whom God has already given us everything and done it for us. When we look to him, we look away from our sin. It is from Jesus's faithfulness, that we find our faith, even when we feel like we don't believe enough, even when we feel like we don't trust enough, and even when we feel like we are of little faith, we can look to him.

The good news is that even in struggles – even in our lament and our frustrations, even when we think God is, or isn't, acting in the world how we want God to act, like Peter – Jesus has already inaugurated the Kingdom of God, and Jesus has already acted in your place, and on our behalf, out of love for you and love for the world. We are free from ulterior motives to love as we are loved, not to gain anything, but to act in joyful response, because God shared in your humanity and mine. Yes, God in Jesus went to the cross as a sacrifice by which we are cleansed and made temples, filled by the Holy Spirit, renewed to love and serve, as we are loved.

Take up your cross and follow me is not merely a notion to suffer on until you die, but a call to recognize that Jesus has already blazed the trail and we carry our cross with him, knowing that his cross is the one which redeems us, not our own, and we follow him because we see the glory of God in Jesus now, but know that we will see it even more fully in the future. So, we joyfully respond and share in Jesus's work, right here and right now, in this world, to be a part of what he is doing, for he makes all things new.

Friends, as we enter into Lent, we must remember the cross as we look to the resurrection. We must see how Jesus is the 'God with us' that we celebrated at Christmas and was revealed Epiphany, as the embodiment of God's saving presence with God's own people. The sonship of Jesus surpasses our every notion of what it is to be a son, because we think of sonship in terms of heredity, receiving a portion, and inheritance, like the 2/3rd share we saw that Elisha sought from Elijah. But Jesus's sonship is the mystery of his own existence, because from first to last, having never been created, Jesus is the expression of God's self-giving love in its fullness, as God's enacted presence on earth.

Our God in the Son will go to the cross in Jesus at the pinnacle of our Lenten season, because human sin put him on that cross, and our sin is pinned there with him. This sin and death itself are defeated in this saving death, a death in our place, because Jesus loves us all. Yes, you and I, indeed all of us are loved even though in our nature, we become enemies of God by our sins and by our excuses for sin.

Yet, despite that remember now that the good news remains, that you share in the 'beloved-ness,' that was spoken from the cloud. This beloved-ness proclaimed by the Father about his Son, because the eternal Son shared in our nature and so we become a part of this relationship in and through the Holy Spirit, just as the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, in and through the Holy Spirit, one God in an eternal community, calling us to share in that life and that love.

Friends, next Sunday will begin our Lenten season, six weeks until Easter. In this season, I call on you not to settle for the short version of the glory as Peter wanted to do, but recognize the good news of our faith, revealed by God in our humanity – that we are called to be changed by the love that God pours out for us. The glory of Jesus is not limited to a moment in our lives, and faithfulness is not some big works to prove ourselves, before God and one another. No, faithfulness is the taking up of our cross, not to suffer, but to change and renew our minds, in the knowledge of this story, and its rhythms and truths, to know and share the love of our God. Amen.

*(Note: For additional reading, including influences on this Sermon, the Pastor recommends 'The Mediation of Christ' by Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Life of the Beloved' by Henri Nouwen, and 'The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity' by R. Kendall Soulen.)*

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 8:31-34, 9:2-10 (Pastor's Translation): And Jesus ***began*** to ***teach*** them that it is necessary for the Son of ***Man*** to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders and the ***chief*** priests and the scribes and to be killed. Then, after three days he is to be resurrected. And he ***spoke*** this rationale openly. ***Peter***, having then taken him aside, began to ***rebuke*** him. And having turned away and having ***looked*** at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and spoke, 'Get behind me ***Satan***, for you do not ***judge*** by the things of ***God***, but the things of ***humanity***.' Then having summoned the ***crowd*** with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone desires to go behind me, let that ***person*** fully ***deny*** their self. Let them take up their ***cross*** and let them ***follow*** me.' And after six ***days*** Jesus took Peter, James and ***John*** to ***bring*** them to a ***high*** mountain to be by themselves, alone. Then he was transfigured before them, and his garments shined so ***exceedingly*** white, it was like no cleaner on ***earth*** could ***bleach*** them. And ***Elijah*** and Moses ***appeared*** to them, and they were in conversation with ***Jesus***. And answering, Peter ***called*** out to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good that we are here and so let us ***make*** three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah,' for he did not know what he should say, since they were greatly terrified. Then there came a ***cloud***, overshadowing them, and there came a ***voice*** out of the cloud, 'This is my ***Son***, the ***beloved***, ***listen*** to him.' And suddenly, having looked around they no ***longer*** saw anyone except Jesus alone with them. And as they went down from the ***mountain***, he ***admonished*** them in ***order*** that they should not tell anyone what they had seen, at least not until the Son of Man had been ***resurrected*** from the dead. And that reason they seized upon themselves to question what it is for the dead to be resurrected.