

Change

Psalm 50:1-6

Mark 9:2-9

William “Bill” Beeners chaired the preaching department at my seminary from 1976 until his retirement in 1990. He had worked in early television, during its live, black and white days. He played a series of “character” roles, usually clueless, comedic types, as he said, “Barney Fifes before there was a Barney Fife.” He appeared on the Jackie Gleason and Sid Caesar shows, and had occasional roles on The Beverly Hillbillies. He called his appearances as Mr. Drysdale's board member or the Clampetts' pool cleaner his “worst but highest paying jobs of all times.” Professor Beeners insisted that every preaching student make honest self-evaluations on tape. At first, we all hated that. Eventually, we learned its value. And as I have said, our video ministry since COVID hit in 2020 has afforded me a fresh opportunity to resume this evaluation. I am genuinely grateful for it.

Professor Beeners also insisted that each one of us develop a speaking style suited to our talents and personalities. He and his colleagues Bill Brower and Virginia Damon went to work on us. They wanted Jeff P. to get rid of his West Virginia twang. They wanted me not to tell canned jokes. “You're funny enough as it is,” Dr. Brower told me. I admit I did not know exactly how to take that. They worked on Amy S's posture (she tended to stoop over), Bryan B's pacing, everything. When any of us

complained about the rigor of their judgment they had a stock response: “You’re speaking for God, the greatest speaker of all time.”

Today we read a passage in which God spoke. And my, did God know how to command an audience. Jesus took the inner circle of his inner circle, Peter, James and John up on a “high mountain”. He was “transfigured” (the Greek term here means “bodily changed”). He became radiant in his glory. Somehow, the disciples perceive Moses and Elijah standing with him. Moses represents the Law; Elijah the prophets. Thus these Hebrew men saw their scripture embodied before them, the Law and the prophets in the flesh. Peter characteristically (in a way it would not be inaccurate to call him the Barney Fife of the disciples) blunders into speech, asking whether they should build three booths, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. This may strike us an odd question, but it has roots in the ancient Jewish Festival of Booths. Observant Jews still follow it; it involves building temporary shelters in which they thank God for the harvest. Peter knows not what to say. Peter knows not that perhaps he should not say anything at all.

Before Jesus responds a cloud envelops them all. And God speaks. With words reminiscent of the baptism of Jesus, God says, “This is my beloved son. Listen to him!” When the cloud clears, four men remain. Moses and Elijah have disappeared. Can you imagine seeing this happen? Can you imagine walking back down the mountain with Jesus afterwards? Maybe not even Peter had much to say. And just as well. As they descend Jesus tells them not to tell anybody what they have

just seen. More accurately, he admonishes them not to tell anybody *yet*. They must wait until after he has risen from the dead. And now we must pause again and with the disciples inevitably ask, “*What did you just say?*” Jesus has just said not to tell anyone until *after he has risen from the dead*.

All of which raises a few big questions. If Jesus is indeed the Son of God can he die? If so, why must he? If he does, will he truly come back to life? How does this even work? And all the while, the disciples learn they must keep their mouths shut about the incredible experience they have just had.

Yes, as the Son of God, Jesus could and did die. In fact, the first heresy, the first false teaching about Jesus to arise, was that he had not really died. Yet he died on the cross, in front of witnesses. When documentation of this—in the form of the Gospels—began to circulate the second heresy arose: that Jesus was not actually the Son of God. As a human being he could and did die. The counter to these false teachings requires faith. Either we believe in Jesus as the Messiah or we do not. That is why the heretical belief Jesus of Nazareth was simply a great man is still with us today. Let us be honest. It is a big ask to encourage one another to believe in his divinity, his “godness”. But we teach that as the Son of God he died on the cross.

So why did he have to die? The answer comes in one word: atonement. Across centuries God's Spirit had inspired prophets to remind God's people of what they should and should not do. God had given them the law. They must follow it. They did

not. We cannot. We are sinners in the deepest pits of our human nature. How should the Holy One respond to our sin? Should God compromise, give us a new message that says, “You know what? I did not really mean it after all. You folks can do whatever you feel like doing”? Or should God hold us accountable in love? The answer, of course, is the latter. And God holds us accountable, first, by atoning for our sins in the person of Jesus, who died to pay for them on the cross. God holds us accountable, second, by requiring that in order to accept this atonement by believing in Jesus as the beloved son of God.

This is an old, old story. Yet we must retell it from time to time. And we must remember the latest chapter in it every time we do. The Gospels tell us Jesus rose from the dead. The immediate consequence of this is it finally gave permission to the disciples to talk about Jesus' Transfiguration. The far more important consequence is that the claim of the resurrection puts us in the position of having to decide whether to believe it ever happened.

Lodged about a third of the way into each of the Gospels, the Transfiguration occupies a bit of a strange moment. The event described is so amazing it feels like it might better have happened closer to the climax of Jesus' ministry. Yet here it is in an earlier stage. It therefore serves as a kind of opening shot, an announcement. Again, its connection to the baptism of Jesus gives us some insight. God speaks. God says, “this is my beloved son.” Commentator Walter Wessel suggests this is the real point of the Transfiguration. Not the flashy, glorious change in Jesus' appearance, but the

proclamation of him as the Messiah. Which leads straight back to the questions with which it confronts us: do we believe Jesus bodily changed that day on the mountain? Do we believe he rose from the dead after his crucifixion?

In his book of essays, God in the Dock, C.S. Lewis writes, “it is precisely these persistent questions that confront us at every turn in our walk with Jesus: do we believe in his miraculous powers? Do we *believe* he is God? Or do we try to have it both ways? Do we try to keep ourselves in a kind of spiritual slumber, in which we can with relative comfort move through our lives without truly answering the questions?” My friend Ron is a retired Presbyterian minister. He and his wife Kim moved to Waco, Texas, to live near their daughters and their families. Once there, they estimate they visited half a dozen Presbyterian Churches. To their sadness they report they cannot remember hearing a single sermon that mentioned the necessity of believing in Jesus as the beloved Son of God. I said perhaps those pastors preached on the topic on Sundays they were not there. After all, I reminded him, neither you nor I hit the topic every week. He doubted it, based on the things included in the announcements and bulletins. It seemed clear those churches focused elsewhere. Ron and Kim now attend an American Baptist church.

That is their choice and they seem satisfied with it. Jesus' Transfiguration and resurrection confront us with a choice. We must choose. Not to choose is itself a no vote. Do we believe Jesus is who the Gospels say he is? Do we believe he is the beloved Son of God? Absent faith in these claims' truth, we may as well rebrand

ourselves as just another community agency. We could stay in the business of doing good work, of pursuing justice near and far, of caring for each other. But we would cease being a church. Our worship would ring hollow. And we would all know, at some level, that we were not being honest with ourselves or the world.

Choose faith. Sam and Dan, brothers, grew up in our church in Traverse City. As boys they were boisterous and, frankly, often handfuls. Now in their early 30's, they remain active in that congregation. We last saw them when I performed Sam's wedding up north in the summer of 2022. I asked them why they still believe. They took the question seriously. When they started to answer they finished each other's sentences, as they always have done. But together they came up with this: prayer, worship with the church, and the fellowship of the youth group. Church, pray for faith for yourself and for others. Worship in person with the church. Enter into fellowship (join us for soup in a few minutes). Use these and whatever other spiritual disciplines work to build you faith.

Jesus was transfigured. He died on the cross. He rose from the dead. Now we await his return. As we wait, work on your faith. God has paid for your sins. In return God asks only that you believe. Believe.