

Today’s gospel lesson recounts a mountaintop experience. Today, on Transfiguration Sunday, the end of the Epiphany Season, Jesus revealed himself as God in a most incredible way to Peter, James and John. ... But Jesus was not alone. Alongside him, the disciples also saw Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures in Jewish religious history.

In the presence of God’s blinding, radiant glory, the disciples were terrified and rendered speechless. Well, except for Peter. Peter, who didn’t know what to say, blurted out, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Peter is often depicted as the impulsive disciple with no filter between his brain and his mouth. Peter’s the one who, in the midst of a storm in the Sea of Galilee, said to Jesus, “Tell me to come to you on the water.” Later on, Peter is the one who will boast that he would never desert Jesus ... right before he disowned Jesus three times and deserted him. Peter gets a bad rap, and for us preachers, he’s one of our favorite whipping boys. And yet, I really appreciate Peter. Imagine if Peter had kept his mouth shut, if he kept his thoughts to himself. If he had done that, then we wouldn’t have a record of his interactions with Jesus. We would also miss out on the lessons that all of us can learn. Peter gave us a great gift by telling us what he was thinking while the other disciples were too afraid to speak.

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,” says Peter. I imagine Peter to be like many of us. When we have a mountaintop experience with the Christ, when we finally see the glory of God, we want to dwell on it, we want to put down stakes, we want to put up tents, and we want to just stay there. But Jesus is not a divine genie we can domesticate and summon at our beck and call. The Messiah cannot be captured in a box of our own making, nor contained in conceptual terms of the human intellect. For just when we think we’ve got Jesus figured out, another transfiguration takes place. It happened to the disciples. Mark writes: “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

In a matter of seconds, the disciples were transfigured from being able to see everything to being able to see nothing. ... I’ve got to say, I’d much prefer clear skies and certainty over fog and uncertainty. But could it be that God reveals God’s self not only in the clarity of a glorious spectacle, but also in the midst of murky ambiguity? Could it be that as awesome as it is to see the glory of Christ, God also desires for us to listen and obey the words of God’s beloved Son? And could it be that the way to listen to Christ is to follow God’s Beloved down the mountain and into the valley?

Some have said that our spiritual journey is like a sustained mountain climb. Others have said that our faith journey is like a roller coaster ride, filled with ups and downs. But perhaps our faith journey is also like a walk in the morning fog, where we can’t quite see clearly where we’re going, but we can hear the steps of a person who is walking in front of us. There’s no constant spectacle. There’s no adrenaline rush – in fact you’re walking quite tentatively for fear of falling. But when the sun burns away the fog, we may find ourselves on a path overlooking a valley, and it takes our breath away in wonder. Other times, when the sun burns away the fog, we may find ourselves in the middle of a dark valley, and it takes our breath away like after being punched in the gut. Either way, as Christians, we believe that none other than Jesus is with us and walks before each step of the way. When we go through trials and find that we’re all alone, we can be sure that Jesus is with us. Mark writes: “Suddenly when the disciples looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.”

Jesus remains. As wonderful as it was to have amazing faith leaders like Moses and Elijah, eventually they were replaced by Joshua and Elisha. Later, they were also replaced because no earthly leader remains. Only Jesus remains. As wonderful as it is to have mountaintop experiences, in the end, they also do not last. Only Jesus

remains. Therefore, we do NOT put our ultimate faith in human leaders or in mountaintop experiences. Instead, we put our faith in Jesus Christ and follow him ... up a mountain to glorious uplifting moments ... AND down into the valley, into the day-to-day, step-by-step journey of faith. Mark ends the passage by writing: "As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." Why does Jesus tell them that?

One reason, I think, is that Jesus knew that people see and hear what they want to see and hear. As a preacher, I've experienced times when people hear my sermons in a totally opposite way of what I intended. So I can understand why Jesus might not want the news of his transfiguration go viral throughout the countryside. The people were primed to look for a powerful Messiah who will return the Jews to their glory days. At this point in Jesus' ministry, it would have been so easy for people to totally misunderstand who Jesus was and the kind of Messiah that he was going to be. I think that's why Jesus told Peter, James and John to remain silent about his transfiguration until after his death and resurrection.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples in Mark chapter 8. Peter once again opened his mouth and proclaimed: "You are the Messiah." While Peter said the right words, it became clear that Peter had in mind a powerful and glorious Messiah, which was totally opposite of how Jesus understood himself. Why else would Peter rebuke Jesus for teaching, "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."

Jesus did not fit into Peter's vision and understanding of what a Messiah ought to be. That's OK. Peter wasn't stupid or clueless. Peter was human. ... Speaking for myself, I prefer to settle down with a God of mountaintop experiences than to follow a God who descends into the valleys of suffering, pain, and injustice. I prefer to worship a triumphant, glorious Messiah than be associated with a suffering Messiah who gets arrested and executed. It's more comfortable to build tents and monuments commemorating a glorious past than to walk down an unknown path toward an uncertain future.

So this morning, Jesus challenges my preferences of a Messiah, even as he challenged Peter's preference. Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus must be true to his divine calling, regardless of how it makes Peter and others uncomfortable.

Now, I've got to give Peter credit. Even with Jesus' harsh rebuke, Peter stuck it out with Jesus. He didn't turn away, fall back, or build his monuments on the mountain. For all Peter's desire for a triumphant Messiah and mountaintop experiences, Peter followed Jesus down from that high place to begin a journey to another high place, a hill called Calvary. Jesus knew that there's no way that people would truly understand His glory until they follow Him to the cross and to his death. The cross was a stumbling block to the disciples, and I suspect it's a stumbling block to us today also. That's why as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered Peter, James and John to tell no one about what they had seen, until after He had risen from the dead.

As we vote on calling a new pastor today, I think this text has many things to teach us. For some, it may mean that we need to stop looking to recreate past mountaintop experiences. For others, it may mean listening for the voice of Christ calling us to step into a future that is foggy and unclear. For others still, it may mean following Jesus to places out of our comfort zone and calls us to die to self and self-preservation. For me, I'm also reminded that in the midst of a leadership transition and the worries that it may cause, Jesus remains. We serve a glorious and risen Savior, who comes down from glory to be with us and for us. If we follow Him, we will be in very good company indeed.

As we enter into the season of Lent, AND as Peakland Baptist prepares to enter into a new season of pastoral leadership, may we look, listen, and follow Jesus our Messiah. Amen.