

## WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

### CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Then a cloud appeared, and covered them,*

*and a voice came from the cloud:*

*“This is my Son, whom I love.*

*Listen to him!”*

(Mark 9.7)

Let us worship God.

**HYMN:** Immortal, invisible, God only wise ...

### PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty and eternal God:

We come together to worship you on this first day of the week because we believe there's more to life than just the things we can see and hear and the things that keep us busy through the week. Even though we can't see you, we believe in you; and even though we can't hear you, we have responded to your call to turn away from sin and live in your ways.

We confess, however, that at times in the past week, we have ignored you — we have not always asked for your guidance; we have neglected to thank you for your blessings; we have not always followed your teachings; we have not always been enthusiastic about serving you.

Forgive us, gracious God, for we know we have sinned and fallen short of your expectations. By the work of the Holy Spirit, then, renew, inspire, and strengthen us, so that we may be more truly what you have made us: your sons and daughters.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

*Our Father, which art in heaven:*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come.*

*Thy will be done in earth,*

*as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,*

*as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation,*

*but deliver us from evil;*

*for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,*

*for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

## ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation —  
 the old has gone; the new has come!  
 All this is from God,  
 who reconciled us to himself through Christ,  
 not counting our sins against us.*

(2 Corinthians 5.17-19)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
 let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** 2 Kings 2.1-12 - Elijah is taken up to heaven

In this reading, the prophet Elijah is suddenly taken up to heaven, as his disciple Elisha looks on.

- **Psalm:** Psalm 50 - “The Mighty One, God, the LORD, speaks”.

Psalm 50 is a covenant renewal liturgy.

It describes an appearance of God, in which God speaks words of rebuke and judgement to the worshipping community because of their unfaithfulness.

The description of God’s approach in the first six verses ties in, somewhat, with the transfiguration story, which we’ll be hearing in a few moments.

- **Letter Reading:** 2 Corinthians 4.1-6 - “Christ ... is the image of God”

In this reading, Paul defends his ministry — he argues that he and his associates have not acted inappropriately.

Further, he argues that the reason that some people do not accept his message is that they have been blinded by what he calls “the evil god of this world”.

- **Gospel Reading:** Mark 9.2-10 - The transfiguration of Jesus

This is Mark’s account of the transfiguration of Jesus.

It takes place several days after Peter has correctly discerned that Jesus is the Messiah.

## SERMON: “Full Disclosure”

For the past few weeks, we’ve been following Jesus through the early days of his ministry, beginning with his baptism. Today, we skip ahead to his transfiguration, which in Mark, comes roughly halfway through his Gospel. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time, now, although Mark gives no indication as to how long. Indeed, there are now twelve disciples, not just the original four. They have listened to Jesus’ teaching, and have seen him do a large number of miracles — mainly healings, although not exclusively so. By this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has also calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee, fed the five-thousand-plus with just

five loaves of bread and two fish, and walked on the surface of the Sea of Galilee during another storm.

Throughout the early days of Jesus' ministry, his disciples and others quickly came to realize that he was no ordinary person; and so, they kept asking, "Who is this?" Of course, we, the readers, know who Jesus is, because Mark began his Gospel with the words, *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God* (Mark 1.1). So, right off the bat, we readers know that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. However, this is something that the people around Jesus at the time — including his disciples — didn't know; not yet, anyway. In Mark — and in Matthew and Luke as well — Jesus keeps his true identity a closely-guarded secret, at least during the early part of his ministry.

In the passage that immediately precedes today's Gospel reading, however, that begins to change. In that passage, Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is; and then who they themselves say he is. In answer to the first question, they say, *John the Baptist* [who had been put to death by that time], *Elijah, or one of the prophets* (Mark 8.28). And, in answer to the second question, Peter says, *You are the Messiah* (Mark 8.29). Jesus then promptly orders the disciples not to disclose this information to anyone else.

Today's story, then, takes place nearly a week later — *after six days*, Mark says in the first verse of today's reading (Mark 9.2). What takes place in today's reading, then, serves to confirm what Peter had said six days before: that Jesus is the Messiah. Indeed, what the disciples Peter, James, and John witness in today's reading gives them additional information as well; for, in this incident, which we call the "transfiguration" of Jesus, they learn that Jesus is also the Son of God.

Why was it just Peter, James, and John who were present for the transfiguration; why not all twelve disciples? Mark doesn't explain. Of course, they are three of Jesus first four disciples, Simon having been renamed "Peter" by Jesus. Why Peter's brother Andrew isn't included in this group is never explained.

Apparently, those three disciples became the inner circle of the group of twelve. Mark tells three other stories in which those three disciples get to accompany Jesus when the other nine don't — although in one of them, Andrew is included. The most familiar of those three stories is the one in which Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane, shortly before he is arrested. In arriving at the garden, Jesus tells the disciples to stay put, while he takes Peter, James, and John further into the garden with him (Mark 14.32-34). Later, after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Peter and John will become the leaders of the group of his followers (Acts 3-4); while James will become the first of the Twelve to be put to death because of his association with Jesus (Acts 12.1-2). Presumably, Jesus saw potential for leadership in those three men, and therefore gave them greater attention and more coaching.

The fact that the transfiguration took place on a mountain is significant, because mountains were believed to be the ideal place for God and human beings to meet, since it was believed that

God lived above the sky. That is, mountains were considered to be halfway-points between earth and heaven. To meet, God would come down to the mountain from heaven, while human beings would go up the mountain. Significantly, in Old Testament times, both Moses and Elijah had had meetings with God on a mountain.

The word “transfiguration” itself refers strictly to the change that took place in Jesus’ appearance. In his original Greek, Mark says that Jesus was “metamorphosed”; the word “transfigured” comes to us from Latin. This is not to say that Jesus took on an entirely different form, however. In Mark’s account, the only thing that changes is the appearance of Jesus’ clothes — they turn *dazzling white* (Mark 9.3). Luke’s account, on the other hand says also that *the appearance of his face changed* (Luke 9.29), while Matthew says that his face *shone like the sun* (Matthew 17.2). What the disciples see, then, is Jesus in his full heavenly glory — his true appearance, as it were; as if his normal appearance were a kind of disguise that made him look like an ordinary, everyday human being. As for Jesus’ clothes turning bright white, white seems to be the color that heavenly beings wear. For example, in Mark’s account of the Easter story, the angel who tells the women that Jesus has been raised is described as *a young man dressed in a white robe* (Mark 16.5). In the book of Revelation, too, there are a number of references to heavenly beings wearing white robes.

In addition to the transfiguration itself, the three disciples witness the sudden appearance of Elijah and Moses, who talk with Jesus; although Mark doesn’t tell us what they talked about. Moses and Elijah, of course were two significant figures from Israel’s history — Moses, the man who had led the Israelites in their escape from Egypt and their trek to the Promised Land, and through whom God had established a formal covenant with Israel; and Elijah, the prophet who had spoken out against the worship of pagan gods, and had campaigned to have the Israelites of his day return to the exclusive worship of Yahweh, the God of their ancestors.

Unfortunately, Mark doesn’t explain what the appearance of these two men means, leaving us to speculate. One possibility is that their appearance emphasized the continuity between the Old Testament and Jesus; that, in his ministry, Jesus wasn’t starting something new, but was rather continuing the work of the various leaders and prophets of the Old Testament. Another possibility is the fact that both Moses and Elijah had had an encounter with God on a mountain in their own lifetimes, similar to what Peter, James, and John were experiencing in this event. Still another possibility is that both Moses and Elijah were associated with the Messianic age — Moses, because God had promised to send a prophet like him to the people of Israel, as we read in our Old Testament reading just two weeks ago (Deuteronomy 18.15, 18); and Elijah, because the Book of Malachi predicts that God would send Elijah back to Israel prior to the coming of “the day of the LORD” (Malachi 4.5-6). So, their appearance at Jesus’ transfiguration would mean that the Messiah had come, and that he was Jesus.

The fact that both of these men, who had been dead for centuries, could re-appear, alive, in First-Century Israel clearly shows that God was at work in this incident. This was clearly a supernatural occurrence.

It's remarkable not only that these two Old Testament figures appeared, but also that Peter actually recognized them; for he says to Jesus, *It is good that we are here* [meaning himself, James, and John]. *Let us put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah* (Mark 9.5). How did Peter know who these two men were? Mark doesn't tell us, and we can only guess.

As for Peter's offer to build the three shelters, Bible scholars speculate on what Peter's purpose was in making such an offer. Some suggest that he wanted to prolong the whole experience — to keep Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on that mountaintop for as long as possible. Mark, on the other hand says simply, *He did not know what to say; they were so frightened* (Mark 9.6), giving the impression that impulsive Peter, feeling he had to say something, simply said the first thing that came to his mind.

It is doubtful whether Peter, James, and John were able, at that moment, to understand the meaning of the strange scene that was unfolding in front of them. Fortunately, an explanation was not long in coming. Mark says, *Then a cloud appeared, and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"* (Mark 9.7). The voice, of course, is the voice of God — the Father. The meaning is now clear: Jesus, the rabbi they've been following around for a number of months, is, in fact, the Son of God!

I'm sure that things must have started to make sense to the three disciples at that point — how it was that Jesus was able to speak with such great authority, and how it was that he was able to do all those miraculous healings. If he were the Son of God, it's no wonder he was able to do those things!

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the whole other-worldly experience came to an end. Jesus' appearance returned to normal; Moses and Elijah disappeared; and it was just the three disciples with Jesus again. How long had the whole incident lasted? Five minutes? An hour? The impression we're given is that it wasn't long — just long enough for the disciples to see what they saw and to hear what they heard. Then it was time to rejoin the other nine disciples, whom they'd left behind at the base of the mountain.

And so, the question of Jesus' identity was now settled. The transfiguration confirmed what Peter had said six days before — that Jesus was the Messiah — and revealed further that he was also the Son of God. Jesus' true identity was now fully disclosed — to those three disciples, at least. But Jesus wasn't ready yet for his true identity to become public knowledge. Mark tells us, *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* (Mark 9.9).

It's significant that this disclosure of Jesus' true identity comes at this point in Mark's Gospel, as Jesus is winding down his ministry in Galilee, and preparing to head south, to the capital city of Jerusalem. There, as we know, he will be arrested, summarily tried, and put to death — but also, ultimately, raised to life again. In this part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus seeks to prepare

his disciples — all twelve of them, that is — for what is to come, by predicting his death and resurrection; not just once, but three times. At the time the transfiguration takes place, Jesus has already predicted his death and resurrection once; he will do so a second time later in this same chapter in Mark, and once more in the following chapter. In spite of his power and authority as the Son of God, Jesus will submit himself to the authority of those who claim to know God's will better than he himself does, and will allow himself to be subjected to a horrible, agonizing, and humiliating death. It's a tremendous paradox — one that the disciples will have to grapple with and come to terms with. It will be a lot for them to process; and so it's no wonder that Jesus tells Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about what they have just witnessed until the turbulent events lying ahead of them have all taken place. The whole story won't make sense until all these things have happened.

It's significant also that Jesus doesn't remain in his transfigured state, but that he returns to his ministry, knowing full well that it will lead to his death on the cross — and beyond. In this part of Mark's Gospel, he not only predicts his death and resurrection, he also challenges his disciples to *follow* him on the way of the cross. By this point in Mark's Gospel, he has already told them, *Whoever wants to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me; for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it* (Mark 8.34-35). Later on, he will say to them, *Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10.43-45).

It's appropriate, then, that we should commemorate the transfiguration of Jesus at this time of the year, just as we wrap up the Season after Epiphany, and move into the Season of Lent — the season in which we prepare for our annual commemoration of Jesus' death, and our celebration of his resurrection. In spite of who he is, Jesus did not play it safe, but continued the work he had been doing in Galilee — proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God, teaching, and healing — motivated by love and compassion, especially for people in need.

**HYMN:** Songs of thankfulness and praise ...

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Loving God, our Creator and Savior:

We thank you for coming among us human beings for a time in the person of Jesus, your Son. We thank you for what he revealed to us about you, not only in his teaching, but also in his actions. Today, as we reflect on his transfiguration, we give you thanks that in that event, you disclosed his true identity to Peter, James, and John; that, for a few moments, they were permitted to see him as he truly is — in his full heavenly splendor as your Son. We thank you that the transfiguration also confirms our faith in Jesus as your Son, and that it thereby underscores for

us his great authority.

We give you thanks that Jesus didn't linger on the mountaintop, but that he returned to his ministry of teaching and healing, proceeding boldly to Jerusalem, where he would face the opposition and hostility of the religious establishment. We thank you that he didn't play it safe, but carried on his ministry with determination and courage, in spite of the risk to himself.

We pray for your church throughout the world, that it also may be courageous in speaking the truth, showing kindness and generosity, and speaking out against wrongdoing. May the church not be preoccupied with institutional issues, but rather focus on ministering to people, and being a positive influence in the wider community. Today we pray in particular for small, remote congregations, such as St. Stephen's Church in Creston, B.C., which we help to support through our givings to *Presbyterians Sharing*. We pray that you would encourage its members and leaders, and guide them in being a genuine Christian community.

We give you thanks and praise for all the blessings we receive from you day by day, by which you sustain us; and we pray for those in our congregations, and others close to us, who are experiencing any kind of need or crisis today, particularly those whom we name before you now: \_\_\_\_\_. In your love and compassion, reach out to each one to provide for their needs, we pray. Help us also to be sensitive to the needs of the people around us, and to respond to them as the Holy Spirit prompts and enables us to.

Having endured several days of severe cold, we give thanks again for people who work outdoors in the cold to provide various services that we depend on; and once again we pray for their safety. We pray also for the safety of those who are homeless, that adequate shelter may be provided for them, especially in this cold weather. We thank you for agencies and ministries that provide shelter for the homeless, and pray that they may be well supported by both the public and government. We pray also that greater effort may be put into responding to the need for affordable housing for low-income people year-round.

We continue to pray for the situation we find ourselves in in the current pandemic. We pray once again for people in positions of authority, as they make decisions about imposing or relaxing restrictions. Guide them, we pray, as they weigh the trade-offs between allowing people to work and keeping people from spreading the COVID-19 virus. We pray for the development and production of vaccines, that greater quantities may be made available as soon as possible, and that they may be effective in giving people immunity. We pray for those who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, that they may receive the support and assistance they need to sustain them until conditions improve. We pray for people who provide essential services, who are at greater risk of contracting the virus, that effective measures may be taken to keep them safe and healthy. We pray for people who are overworked and fatigued because of the pandemic, that they may receive adequate support to sustain them. We pray for those who are experiencing stress and anxiety due to separation from family members and friends, that they may receive the strength and encouragement they need to see them through this period.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the

name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**HYMN:** Praise him, praise him, Jesus our blessèd Redeemer!

**COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue living as children of God

and disciples of Jesus.

And may God bless you:

May the Lord of peace give you peace

at all times and in every way;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(2 Thessalonians 3.16)