

“COME WITH US TO THE PLAIN”

Mark 9:1-9

⁹ And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

² 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. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ 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.” ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

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!”

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

⁹ 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.

Message:

GOD DOES GREAT THINGS ON MOUNTAINS! HE GAVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TO MOSES ON MOUNT SINAI. HE BUILT HIS TEMPLE AND HIS HOLY CITY JERUSALEM ON MOUNT ZION. ON MOUNT MORIAH HE PROVIDED THE SACRIFICE OF A RAM TO SAVE ISAAC. ON MOUNT CALVARY HE PROVIDED THE SACRIFICE OF HIS SON TO SAVE ALL MANKIND.

JESUS PREACHED HIS GREAT SERMON ON A MOUNT. AND WHEN HIS HE RETURNS IN GLORY, IT WILL BE ON A MOUNTAIN THAT JESUS GIVES A FEAST TO END ALL FEASTS FOR HIS FOLLOWERS: *“ON THIS MOUNTAIN THE LORD ALMIGHTY WILL PREPARE A FEAST OF RICH FOOD FOR ALL PEOPLES, A BANQUET OF AGED WINE—THE BEST OF MEATS AND THE FINEST OF WINES. ON THIS MOUNTAIN HE WILL DESTROY THE SHROUD THAT ENFOLDS ALL PEOPLE, HE WILL SWALLOW UP DEATH FOREVER.”* [Isaiah 25:6-8a] LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: JESUS DOES GREAT THINGS ON MOUNTAINS TOO. AND TODAY WE WILL LOOK AT ANOTHER GREAT THING JESUS DID ON A MOUNTAIN WHEN HE SHOWED THREE OF HIS DISCIPLES THAT HE WAS GOD.

I INVITE YOU TO FOLLOW ALONG IN YOUR BULLETINS AS WE CONSIDER WHAT HAPPENED ON THE MOUNTAIN THAT DAY.

FIRST WE READ THAT JESUS MADE A PROMISE TO HIS DISCIPLES: “I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, SOME WHO ARE STANDING HERE WILL NOT TASTE DEATH BEFORE THEY SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD COME WITH POWER.” SIX DAYS LATER HE FULFILLED THAT PROMISE BY TAKING THREE OF THEM—PETER AND JAMES AND JOHN—UP “A VERY HIGH MOUNTAIN” AND WAS TRANSFIGURED BEFORE THEIR VERY EYES, SHOWING THEM THAT HE WAS GOD. HIS CLOTHES BECAME DAZZLINGLY WHITE AS HE REVEALED HIS DIVINE NATURE. PETER AND JAMES AND JOHN WERE STUNNED AS THEY TRED TO ABSORB THE FACT THAT THEY WERE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD HIMSELF.

THEN TWO FIGURES SUDDENLY APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE AND BEGIN TALKING WITH JESUS. ONE OF THEM WAS MOSES, THE GREAT LAWGIVER OF THE *TORAH*, AND THE OTHER WAS ELIJAH, THE GREAT OLD TESTAMENT PROPHET. IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD AND WHAT THEY TOOK TO BE TWO GHOSTS, THE DISCIPLES WERE TERRIFIED. THEN, AS IF THERE WEREN'T ALREADY ENOUGH FIREWORDS, GOD THE FATHER DESCENDED ON THE MOUNTAIN IN A CLOUD. HIS WORDS WERE FEW AND CLEAR: "*THIS IS MY SON, WHOM I LOVE. LISTEN TO HIM!*"

AFTER HE HAD SPOKEN, THE CLOUD DISAPPEARED, MOSES AND ELIJAH DISAPPEARED, AND ONLY JESUS REMAINED. THE LAWGIVER WAS GONE, THE PROPHET WAS GONE AND GOD THE FATHER WAS GONE. THERE WAS ONLY JESUS. JESUS WAS NOW THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE: NO ONE CAME TO THE FATHER EXCEPT THROUGH HIM. [John 14:6] HE WAS THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA, THE BEGINNING AND THE END. [Rev. 1:18; 21:6; 22:13] HE WAS ALL IN ALL. *WHEN THEY LOOKED UP THEY SAW NOBODY WITH THEM EXCEPT JESUS.*

NOW THIS WAS WHAT THE DISCIPLES HAD BEEN WAITING FOR! CLARK KENT HAD TURNED INTO SUPERMAN BEFORE THEIR VERY EYES! THEY FINALLY HAD THE MESSIAH THEY HAD LONGED FOR: A SUPERHERO WITH DIVINE POWER WHO WOULD ZAP THE ENEMIES OF ISRAEL AND BUILD A NEW EMPIRE LIKE THE ONE DAVID HAD BUILT A THOUSAND YEARS BEFORE!

THIS WAS THE KINGDOM OF GOD COMING IN POWER! IMAGINE, THEN, HOW SURPRISED AND DISAPPOINTED THEY MUST HAVE FELT WHEN ON THE WAY DOWN THE MOUNTAIN JESUS WARNED THEM NOT TO TELL ANYONE WHAT THEY HAD SEEN! THIS WAS THE BIGGEST NEWS OF ALL TIME AND THEY HAD TO KEEP IT TO THEMSELVES? YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING! THEY HAD SEEN GOD HIMSELF—AND THEY COULDN'T TELL ANYONE ABOUT IT?? BUT THAT IS WHAT JESUS SAID TO THEM—AND IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME HE HAD SAID IT.

ON ONE OCCASION JESUS WAS CASTING DEMONS OUT OF PEOPLE AND THE DEMONS BEGAN SHOUTING, "*YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD!*" JESUS IMMEDIATELY, "*...REBUKED THEM AND WOULD NOT ALLOW THEM TO SPEAK BECAUSE THEY KNEW HE WAS THE CHRIST.*" [Luke 4:41] AT ANOTHER TIME, AFTER CLEANSING A LEPER FROM HIS DISEASE, "*HE SENT HIM AWAY AT ONCE WITH A STRONG WARNING: 'SEE THAT YOU DON'T TELL THIS TO ANYONE.'*" AFTER RESTORING SIGHT TO TWO BLIND MEN, HE, "*...WARNED THEM STERNLY, 'SEE THAT NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT THIS.'*" EVEN AFTER PETER HAD RECOGNIZED THAT JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, HE WARNED HIM NOT TO TELL ANYONE.

WHY WOULD JESUS HAVE WANTED TO CONCEAL HIS DIVINE IDENTITT? WHY WOULD HE HAVE WARNED PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED IN HIM TO KEEP THE GOOD NEWS TO THEMSELVES WHEN LATER ON HE WOULD SEND THEM OUT TO BROADCAST THE SAME GOOD NEWS ALL OVER THE WORLD? WHY START OUT COMMANDING THEM TO KEEP SILENT ABOUT HIM AND THEN URGE THEM TO SHOUT IT FROM THE ROOFTOPS?

THE CLUE LIES IN THE LAST WORDS HE SPOKE TO THEM ON THE WAY 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.*" JESUS DIDN'T COME TO AMAZE AND DELIGHT PEOPLE WITH DISPLAYS OF HIS SUPERNATURAL POWER: HE CAME TO DIE FOR THEIR SINS. AND THAT WAS SOMETHING THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF TROUBLE UNDERSTANDING. EVEN WHEN THEY DID BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND IT THEY HAD A LOT OF TROUBLE ACCEPTING IT.

THEY WANTED SOMEONE WHO WOULD ANIHILATE THEIR ENEMIES—NOT SOMEONE WHO WOULD TELL THEM TO LOVE THEIR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THEM. THEY

WANTED A WARRIOR, NOT A SAVIOR. WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD A MESSIAH WHO WAS GOD HIMSELF AND HAD ALL THE POWER OF THE UNIVERSE AT HIS DISPOSAL SUBMIT TO HIS ENEMIES? IT MADE NO SENSE.

IT ALL RESTED ON THEIR CONVICTION THAT THEIR PROBLEM WAS THEIR ENEMIES WHEN THEIR REAL PROBLEM WAS THEIR SIN. THEIR BLINDNESS, THEIR LEPROSY, THEIR LAMENESS, THEIR SICKNESS, THEIR POVERTY—THESE WERE JUST SYMPTOMS OF THEIR REAL DISEASE, WHICH WAS SIN. AND IT TOOK DEATH TO ATONE FOR SIN. AND THAT IS WHY JESUS CAME: TO ATONE FOR THEIR SINS WITH HIS DEATH.

IT'S AS SIMPLE AND UNFATHOMABLE AS THIS: *"GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE."* THAT IS WHAT THE GIFT IS; THAT IS HOW THE GIFT WAS GIVEN; THAT IS HOW THE GIFT IS RECEIVED. JESUS HAD COME TO CRUSH THE HEAD OF THE SERPENT AND TAKE AWAY THE POWER OF SIN.

THE MIRACULOUS HEALINGS AND CASTING OUT OF DEMONS WERE JUST MINOR SKIRMISHES BEFORE THE REAL BATTLE, WHICH WOULD BE FOUGHT ON THE CROSS. AND WHEN THAT BATTLE WAS WON, THE PRICE OF ALL HUMAN SIN WAS PAID IN FULL. SATAN COULD NO LONGER ACCUSE US OF OUR SINS BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN ATONED FOR AND WE WERE FREE OF THEIR POWER. THEN IT COULD BE PROCLAIMED: ***"IF YOU BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT JESUS IS LORD AND CONFESS WITH YOUR LIPS THAT GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, YOU WILL BE SAVED."*** [Rm. 10:9] IT'S AS SIMPLE AS THAT: OUR ETERNAL DESTINY IS ASSURED.

BUT WE STILL HAVE A JOURNEY TO COMPLETE IN THIS WORLD, DON'T WE? JOURNEY THAT CAN BRING MANY HARDSHIPS. THAT'S WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER THAT OUR JOB AS CHRISTIANS IS NOT TO **ADJUST** TO THE WORLD BUT TO **OVERCOME** THE WORLD. JESUS TOLD HIS DISCIPLES: *"IN THIS WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TROUBLE. BUT TAKE HEART! I HAVE OVERCOME THE WORLD."*

THE QUESTION IS: HOW DO WE OVERCOME THE WORLD? ***WE OVERCOME IT BY REMEMBERING THAT THERE IS ALWAYS A DAY OF RESURRECTION!*** AS CHRISTIANS WE ARE BEING CRUCIFIED TO THE WORLD SO THAT WE CAN BE RESURRECTED WITH CHRIST. PAUL WROTE: *"IF WE WERE JOINED WITH CHRIST IN THE LIKENESS OF HIS DEATH, WE SHALL BE JOINED WITH HIM IN THE LIKENESS OF HIS RESURRECTION."*

IT'S NOT AN EASY LESSON, BUT SOONER OR LATER WE NEED TO LEARN THAT TO BE RESURRECTED, WE MUST FIRST DIE. CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT A MATTER OF BEING IMPROVED, BUT A MATTER OF DYING AND BEING REBORN. AND DYING AND BEING REBORN IS NOT PAINLESS. IT INVOLVES BEING TORN DOWN AND RE-ASSEMBLED. IT INVOLVES HAVING THE DROSS BURNED AWAY SO THAT THE GOLD CAN BE REVEALED. CHRISTIANS LIVE IN A CRUCIBLE, NOT A COUNTRY CLUB. WE ARE "COUNTED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED [Rm. 8:36], NOT AS MANAGEMENT TRAINEES TO BE PROMOTED. GOD HAS FITTED US FOR A CROSS, NOT A CAREER.

THAT'S WHY IS ESSENTIAL TO REMEMBER THAT AFTER THE CROSS THERE IS ALWAYS A DAY OF RESURRECTION. AS PAUL WROTE: *"...WE KNOW THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD WORKS FOR THE GOOD OF THOSE WHO LOVE HIM, WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE."* [Rm 8:28] GOD WILL WORK GOOD OUT OF OUR SUFFERING IF WE PLACE OURSELVES IN HIS HANDS AND TRUST HIM TO DO IT.

I JUST FINISHED READING A BOOK ENTITLED *LINCOLN'S BATTLE WITH GOD*, ABOUT ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LIFELONG STRUGGLE WITH THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. LINCOLN HAD A HARD LIFE. HE HAD AN ABUSIVE FATHER AND A SEMI-DERANGED WIFE. HE STRUGGLED WITH DEPRESSION ALL HIS LIFE—DEPRESSION THAT ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION BROUGHT HIM CLOSE TO SUICIDE. AS PRESIDENT HE WAS VILIFIED AND

CURSED BY HALF THE COUNTRY AND SUFFERED ENORMOUS GUILT OVER LEADING THE COUNTRY INTO A WAR THAT CLAIMED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF LIVES.

HE STARTED OUT AS AN ATHEIST WHO OPENLY MOCKED CHRISTIANITY. BUT AS HIS TRIALS WENT ON, HE PRIVATELY BEGAN TO EXPLORE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. HE BECAME CLOSE FRIENDS WITH A FEW PASTORS. HIS SPEECHES BEGAN TO INCLUDE BIBLICAL REFERENCES AND SPEAK OF A GOD WHO INTERVENED IN HUMAN AFFAIRS.

DURING HIS FIRST TERM AS PRESIDENT, WHEN THE WAR WAS NOT GOING WELL FOR THE UNION FORCES, TO ADD TO EVERYTHING ELSE, HE LOST HIS ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD SON, WILLIE, WHOM HE ADORED. WHEN WILLIE LINCOLN DIED OF SMALLPOX, LINCOLN WAS EMOTIONALLY SHATTERED. HE WOULD PACE BACK AND FORTH IN HIS OFFICE, CRYING AND ASKING WHY? WHY? HIS WIFE WAS SO DEVASTATED SHE COULDN'T EVEN ATTEND THE FUNERAL, SO LINCOLN WENT ALONE.

THE SERVICE, WAS CONDUCTED AT NEW YORK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BY REVREND GURLEY, WHO WAS THE PASTOR AND A GOOD FRIEND OF LINCOLN. AT THE END OF HIS SERMON, DR. GURLEY SPOKE THE FOLLOWING WORDS:

“ONLY LET US BOW IN GOD’S PRESENCE WITH AN HUMBLE AND TEACHABLE SPIRIT; ONLY LET US BE STILL AND KNOW THAT HE IS GOD; ONLY LET US ACKNOWLEDGE HIS HAND, AND HEAR HIS VOICE, AND INQUIRE AFTER HIS WILL, AND SEEK HIS HOLY SPIRIT AS OUR COUNSELOR AND GUIDE, AND ALL IN THE END, WILL BE WELL. IN HIS LIGHT WE SHALL SEE LIGHT; BY HIS GRACE OUR SORROWS WILL BE SANCTIFIED—THEY WILL BE MADE A BLESSING TO OUR SOULS—AND BY AND BY WE SHALL HAVE OCCASION TO SAY, WITH BLENDED GRATITUDE AND REJOICING, ‘IT IS GOOD FOR US THAT WE HAVE BEEN AFFLICTED.’”

“GOD CAUSES ALL THINGS TO WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM, WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.”

AFTER THE DAY OF SUFFERING THERE ALWAYS COMES A DAY OF BLESSING. THANK GOD WE HAVE A SAVIOR WHO DOES MORE THAN MERELY SHOW US HIS GLORY ON THE MOUNTAIN, BUT ONE WHO WALKS WITH US AS WE MAKE OUR WAY THROUGH THE VALLEY. A SAVIOR WHO STRENGTHENS OUR SPIRITS AND ILLUMINATES OUR WAY. A SAVIOR WHO WILL ONE DAY LEAD US ACROSS THE LAST RIVER AND LAND US SAFE ON CANAAN SIDE.

JESUS SHOWED PETER AND JAMES AND JOHN WONDERFUL THINGS ON THE MOUNTAIN THAT DAY. BUT THEN IT WAS TIME TO GO DOWN. I LIKE TO THINK THAT WORDS LIKE THE ONES WE JUST SANG WENT THROUGH THEIR MINDS:

“HOW GOOD LORD TO BE HERE! YET WE MAY NOT REMAIN. BUT SINCE YOU BID US LEAVE THE MOUNT, COME WITH US TO THE PLAIN.”

AMEN.