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“Do I Have a Witness?”

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2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-10

Mark 9:2-10: ²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

A witness is someone who has seen something and can talk about it. *Our world is looking for authentic witnesses to life that will work.* Is the life of faith in Jesus Christ something that we can talk about? Uncertain times always bring into focus the authenticity of our faith. Does believing in Jesus really matter? Does it work?

Most of us aspire to live steady, secure, strong, self-contained, and in control lives. And somehow we hope that God will help with that. But there are always circumstances which come along and challenge the very foundations on which we’ve built our lives.

- Financial situation has shaken a lot of people. I’m in a small group where three of the men have lost their jobs. In the case of one of the man in his mid-30’s, he and his wife are expecting their first child, and now he is anticipating that he may end up being the stay-at-home dad. “It’s like we have been planning for years to go on a trip to Italy, and suddenly we are arriving in Latvia. Life is so different than we expected. It’s scary.”
- Or, another family, where the wife and mother of 3 suddenly died in her early ‘40’s.
- Or those gnawing feelings that this is just not the way it’s “supposed” to be, and suddenly life starts to feel like it is spinning out of control.

Where is Jesus? Whether it's something big or little, our circumstances can sometimes throw us—confuse us—or cause fear to well up inside us.

I asked a friend who has been through some rough times lately, “How are you holding together?” He replied, “Not very well really. I have believed in God for a long time and I think I've been pretty faithful about it. But God just doesn't seem to be coming through for me.”

Is God “coming through for you?” Is God doing what you expect him to be doing—or are you a little disappointed? Faith just doesn't seem to be working for you these days—and as a consequence we have no idea what it might mean to be a witness to Jesus Christ.

This very peculiar little story right in the middle of the Gospels—known as the “Transfiguration”—comes at a time when Jesus' disciples were a little confused about things, too. And, honestly, things were going to get even more disturbing and confusing. In their case, it wasn't that they couldn't see anything happening, but they just weren't sure how to describe it.

In the chapters leading up to this story, the disciples had watched Jesus perform amazing miracles. They were personally so drawn to Jesus that they gave up their own careers and became his followers. And they had all sorts of expectations about what he was going to do—both in their own personal lives and in the life of the nation which was being oppressed by the Roman Empire.

But just when they thought that they were figuring Jesus out, it seemed like there were huge challenges to faith.

- There was the sharp criticism of the religious people of Jesus' day, saying that Jesus was a phony;
- There were differing opinions about Jesus; cf. Mark 8.27ff: “Who do people say I am?” “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, still others say you are one of the prophets.” Jesus, “And what about you?” “You are the Messiah,” they responded. That's what they believed, but their idea was that the Messiah was going to be the liberating King.
- Jesus made the statement in Mark 8.31 that he must suffer many things, and be rejected, and be killed—and then rise. And Peter took him aside and rebuked him!

Have you ever “rebuked Jesus”? I have. In fact, if I'm honest, I do it rather regularly. Sometimes, God doesn't come through like I had hoped. Sometimes, I pray for things and am disappointed.

- Em's ultrasound images of 2nd granddaughter—and abnormalities

Is faith in Jesus working for you?

So we come to our text: Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him to a high mountain where they are alone. And it's almost like he wants them to see the big picture.

And what happened was amazing: Jesus was “transfigured” before them and stood there in dazzling white—and with him were Moses and Elijah. The three were talking together.

Let’s look at this scene from the perspective of the disciples. In Jesus’ day, there were at least 3 ultimate answers that people gave about how God shaped peoples’ lives—and 3 sets of expectations for how people thought God would act.

1. Some saw God primarily as the holy lawgiver, and if you wanted to be in good with God, you needed to ***do your very best to keep the Law***. It was pretty cut and dried, really. Keep the Law and God would bless you—and then you could be a witness to God’s gifts.

For many God was treated a little like a divine vending machine. You do the right things, and God will do right by you. By Jesus’ time, the “Law” which was derived from the 10 Commandments and the rest of the teaching of Moses, had been more or less distilled into 613 commandments—which defined 365 things that you shouldn’t do and 248 things that you should do. The truly religious people tried to follow these scrupulously and looked down on anyone who didn’t. You were a witness if you looked holy.

And here on the mountain with Jesus was Moses, the Lawgiver.

2. But another expectation for what God should do was represented by Elijah that day. Elijah was one of the great Old Testament prophets and when people thought of Elijah, they thought about some immediate experience of God’s presence or some tangible word from God. Following the rules is one thing, but having God speak directly to you is something else.

E.g. One of my students said recently, “I really don’t have a testimony, because nothing really big has ever happened to me.” I guess she had been around a lot of people who talked about the amazing things that God had done in their lives and she couldn’t point to any tangible way that God had intervened for her. Is God only real if you have had some sort of spectacular experience with Jesus? Do you need a miracle or a prophetic word to you in order to believe that God is at work—or to have something to talk about?

3. But a third expectation in Jesus’ day was that God was going to send the Messiah to ***trump all other earthly power***. For people living for centuries under the political oppression of the Persians, then Greeks, then Romans, many of the people just wanted a powerful change. The greatest “witness” that God was God would be that God would just show up and make things right again.

And for the disciples--before their very eyes—here was Jesus transfigured into a dazzling white figure—appearing as one of power.

So here are the three disciples, and right there in front of them are Moses the Lawgiver, Elijah the Prophet, and Jesus the King. Now here is something they could talk about!

No wonder the disciples responded like they did. Peter starts jabbering—which is what he always did when he didn't know what to say. “It's great to be here! Let's build shelters.” But inside they were terrified. The Gr word is *phobos* which is the word phobia, with a little word on the front that amplifies it. It's like sheer terror.

This is truly a God-moment! Wow! It's got all the elements of glory, splendor, and the miraculous.

But watch what happens—

In the face of all that we want to make out of religion—keeping the rules, or having great experiences, or wanting God just to solve the problem with naked power, God has one message: “This is my son, whom I love! Listen to him!”

You see, faith that really makes a difference in our life—during whatever the circumstances—is faith that listens to and trusts in Jesus. We don't reduce faith to a set of rules—or particular experiences—or our demand that God fix things. We listen to Jesus.

E.g. Christina in Uganda.

As Jesus and the disciples were coming down from the mountain, he commanded them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the resurrection. Why did he tell them to keep silent? I thought they were to be witnesses.

It was because Jesus knew that they would get it wrong. They wanted something spectacular—something flashy—something that lit up the sky. But Jesus' mission was not about triumph, but about sacrifice. Jesus came, not to be crowned an earthly king, but to give his life for us all. Jesus came to serve—and to invite us into joyous relationship, service and witness.

It was AFTER the resurrection that Jesus gave his disciples their marching orders: John 20.19ff “As the Father has sent me, now I am sending you!”

If you want an anchor that will hold—if you want to know what it means to live with miraculous joy through whatever life throws at you—if you want to be a witness—look to Jesus—listen to Jesus—walk with Jesus—trust in Jesus. ***It is JESUS—not rule keeping, not spectacular experiences, and not even God always making things better—who will anchor our lives. And when Jesus is the center, you will always have something to talk about.***