

Seeing the Real Jesus

According to a recent survey, New Year's resolutions fall into four basic categories. Number four is relationship resolutions, number three is money-related resolutions, number two is weight-related resolutions and number one is, guess what? New skill or education-related resolutions. Does your resolution fit into one of those? Oh, wait, are you one of those who refuses to make resolutions? You say, "Ya know, you can't teach an old dog new tricks!" Well, do you know where that saying came from?

In 1523 the English animal trainer, John Fitzherbert, said, "The dog must be trained when he is a whelp, or else it will not be [trained]." But is that true?

The Discovery Channel's "Mythbusters" took on the challenge. They found a pair of aging Alaskan malamutes, a breed known for its stubbornness. These two dogs, Bobo and Cece, didn't know a single trick and, as 7-year-olds, they were the canine equivalent of a couple of 50-year-old "stick-in-the-muds." Mythbusters hosts, Jamie and Adam, over a four-day period tried to teach them something new. The results? At the end of just four days, both Bobo and Cece could heel, sit, lie down, stay, and shake upon command, proving Fitzherbert and YOU wrong! Old dogs CAN learn new tricks!

Which brings us to our Scripture for today, the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. Yes, we're back now in the gospel of Mark where we will stay right through Resurrection Sunday in April. What does this have to do with New Year's resolutions? Well, the Greek word for "transfiguration" is *metamorphoo* which is a Greek word that has been Anglicized into the word "metamorphosis" or "radical change." So, Mark 9 is a great place for us to start off 2014! First, we need to notice that...

I. The Setting Screams of Spiritual Significance.

Where does this take place? On a mountaintop. Who are the main characters? Elijah, Moses and Jesus. Elijah and Moses are both famous for their own encounters with God on mountaintops, Elijah on Mount Carmel and Moses on Mount Sinai. What mountaintop does this encounter take place on? The text doesn't tell us the name of the mountain but it says that six days earlier they were in Caesarea Philippi which is at the foot of Mount Hermon. In verse 2 it says that Jesus took them up "a high mountain." Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel at over 9,000 feet. I think they were on Mount Hermon.

But why are mountains important? Well, God doesn't tell us why He chose to do so many spiritually important things on mountaintops but the simple fact is that He did and in the future will do so again. On Mount Sinai He gave Moses the Ten Commandments and all of the Law of God, which gives us the definition of right and wrong. On Mount Carmel God defeated the false prophets and priests of Baal, which demonstrated His power over all other spiritual forces. On another mountain, Mount Moriah, God tested Abraham's faith and then substituted a lamb for the

sacrifice in place of his son Isaac. Mt. Moriah not only provided the site for the future Temple, but also a glimpse into the future of real salvation: how God would provide another lamb, Jesus, on mount Golgatha as a substitute to die in our place. And one day, Jesus will return to begin His righteous reign and, when He does, His foot will first touch the Mount of Olives. I don't know why, but God's greatest actions take place on mountains. So, the fact that the Transfiguration took place on a mountain screams that it is of great spiritual significance. But secondly, it's not just the setting but...

II. It's the Speaker and Who He's Speaking to that Demonstrate His Mercy.

Five people are recorded as speaking in the three gospel versions of this event. Jesus speaks with Elijah and Moses and later with the disciples; Peter speaks to Jesus, and God the Father speaks. But who is the Father speaking to? He's speaking to the disciples! This is the first sign of mercy. God could have reprimanded Peter for babbling on and on about building commemorative booths but He simply addresses all three disciples. The fact that the God of the Universe addressed them is a sign of His intentions. Luke says that Jesus, Elijah and Moses were talking about "his departure" meaning His death and resurrection, so the Father could've entered into that conversation and told Peter to "Hush up! We've got important things to talk about here!" But He didn't do that. Instead, He spoke to the "babbling" disciple directly. Do you see how that reveals His heart? God's heart does not go first to judgment and correction. It goes first to humility and compassion and mercy. Is that true of you? Moms and Dads here today, is that true of you?

And then, what does the Father say? Pretty much the same thing that He said at Jesus' baptism:

...This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him! (Mark 9:7)

At Jesus' baptism, the Father addressed His Son and said:

You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:11)

In Men's Fraternity we looked hard at these words and we saw a pattern of how Fathers in particular should speak to and about their children in public. There are three parts here. First, the Father is proud to be identified with the Son. He's proud as can be! Secondly, the Father speaks His love OUT LOUD! He doesn't "assume" that the Son or that the disciples know that He loves the Son, He says it out loud! Parents, when's the last time you did that in public? God the Father basically did it every time He spoke of His Son in public. And thirdly, in public, the Father focused on what the Son did well. You say, "Well, that was easy for Him! His Son was perfect!" Yes, but is your son or daughter perfectly bad? Of course not. In public, why not follow God the Father's pattern and speak only of what your son or daughter does that is good. Leave your "loving instruction" for private conversations. By whom He speaks to and in what He says, God the Father demonstrates what the path of mercy looks like.

And why should we do this? Well, when we know that we are loved, it changes everything about our world. Our whole attitude changes when we are breathing the air of unconditional love.

Last spring, in the first round of the NCAA Men's Basketball tournament, the 13th seed, the South Dakota State Jackrabbits, were playing the 4th seed Michigan Wolverines. In the wild, if a jackrabbit ever met a wolverine, the outcome would not

be pretty! So, if you were the Jackrabbit's coach, what kind of a pep talk would you give your little bunnies before sending them out on the court? Scott Nagy, the South Dakota State head coach gave them this unique and theologically rich pregame speech. He said:

"I want you to play like you're loved! Play freely! Love isn't dependent on your performance. No matter how you play, you are loved! Play with that in mind." ⁱ

Michigan won the game, but the Jackrabbits were not devoured! They left the court with their heads held high because they played with freedom and passion.

On the mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was talking game strategy with two spiritual heavy weights, both of whom knew the exertion and exhaustion of competing against intense and life-threatening evil in this world. And now Jesus was going to have to face a battle bigger than what either of them had faced. His Father could've come in with some kind of a Knute Rockne pep talk: "Hit 'em high, hit 'em low, then hit hard, hard, hard. Go, go, go. Win this one for the Gipper!" But He doesn't do that. Instead, before the most important competition between good and evil that the world would ever know, God the Father simply tells God the Son, "You're my Son. Never forget how much I love you. The rest of you guys, listen to Him." The Father had faith in His Son. What an awesome example!

So, what's the big contest that you'll be facing this year? Is it months away and you're already getting nervous? Your job is on the line or maybe it's your health or some significant relationship. You're the Jackrabbit going up against the Wolverine. How can this possibly turn out well?

Focus on this: focus on what Jesus says to you. Jesus says:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete... You are my friends if you do what I command... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last. (John 15:9, 11, 14, 16)

As a church, we're facing a challenge, a huge challenge: reaching 1.2 million people with the Grace and Mercy message of Jesus Christ. Some of you are already considering excuses for why you can't go out on that court:

"I don't have the right skill sets for this!"

"Has this strategy ever really been tried before?"

"I don't have any resources left for a competition this important!"

Don't be distracted! Here's what I want you to do: signup for our Grace and Mercy Banquet to be held at the Riverview Banquet Facility in Simsbury on Friday night, Jan. 17. Sign up today. We're all going to leave that place with Jesus' message ringing in our ears, "I want you to play like you are loved! Play freely! My love isn't dependent on your performance! No matter how you play, you are loved! Play with that in mind." If we play like that, no matter what the score, no matter what the statistics, we will emerge the winners in the name of Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to one last truth from this passage, which is that...

III. The "Seeing" of the Real Jesus Proves What's Coming.

As we enter into this new year, everyone from stock brokers to farmers to politicians wishes he knew what was coming. This is the week that everyone is looking for a prophet or prophetess to guide his steps.

And that's what the disciples were looking for as they came down the mountain with Jesus. It had been an unforgettable experience – Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes! On top of that, they saw Elijah and Moses, the two greatest prophets in Jewish history! Then a cloud enveloped them and they heard the actual voice of God speaking directly to them! It was unbelievable!!

But still they wanted to know, "What's next? What is Jesus talking about when He says that He's going to be 'risen from the dead'? And isn't Elijah supposed to come first?: So, Jesus says to them:

To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him. (Mark 9:12-13)

Yes, the disciples have had a remarkable, thrilling, terrifying experience. But what does Jesus want them to take away from it? He wants them to focus on how any of it matches up with what is written!! This fabulous "spiritual experience" wasn't the end in itself. It was God's way of confirming the eternal Word. Why? Because the Word of God is always your final link to what is true – past, present or future – not your latest ethereal spiritual experience.

In fact, Jesus tells the disciples they can't tell anybody ABOUT what just happened on the mountain until AFTER He is physically resurrected! Why not? Because the reason for the "experience" was to prove the validity of His Word: that the resurrection, when it happened, was real and prophesied beforehand, just as His suffering and death were. Jesus is driving the disciples back to the Word because it is the Word that remains, the Word that will be completely fulfilled. It is the Word that gives us faith, hope and love; and the Word, the Living Word, that gives us life.

Why must Elijah come first? Because the Word says he must. Why must the Son of Man suffer and be rejected? Because the Word says He must. Why was Jesus transfigured so that the disciples could see His God side, His power and glory? So that what Jesus spoke just a week earlier could be fulfilled. He said:

...I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power. (Mark 9:1)

And Peter, who was one who saw it, later wrote:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (II Peter 1:16-18)

And why does Peter re-tell this event? Later he writes: (II Peter 3:2)

I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

He wants us to put all our trust in the Word of God. Seeing the Word fulfilled proves what's coming in the future.

Is that what your future is built upon – God's Word? In terms of your relationships, are you building relationships on the principles you find in God's Word or on the principle you see demonstrated on Access Hollywood? In terms of your finances, are you "investing" in things that will last or things that will decay? Jesus says that those who invest in saving human souls are putting their treasures in an eternal investment in heaven. In terms of your time, are you wasting it on things of this world, or leveraging it on activities that give Jesus honor and glory?

The three disciples who saw the real "transfigured" Jesus were never quite the same. They played the game of life with a new abandon as if it didn't really matter if they personally won or lost but only if the One they loved was pleased. Would you like to see this "glorified" Jesus? Open this book and then ask Jesus, to open your eyes.

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. (Mark 9:8)

May you see the real Jesus often, in His Word, this year. Let's pray...

ⁱ PreachingToday, News That Illustrates: April 1, 2013 "March Madness: Play like You're Loved."