

Message: God’s revelation, our salvation

“Things are not always as they seem”

Have you ever heard that expression? Another variation is “looks can be deceiving.” In our western culture, similar phrases include “if it looks too good to be true... (it must not be true)” and “only believe what you can see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears.” In a performance-based culture, where we don’t consider what someone did for us yesterday but what they do for us today, these statements are like a mantra. We’re jaded because so many people seek their own interests first. Everyone else gets what’s left over after the one who’s first is done. All that matters is first place and being first is more important than anything else. The end justifies the means.

David Kinnaman, director of research for the Barna Group, writes, “Research shows that people’s moral profile is more likely to resemble that of their peer group than it is to take shape around the tenets of a person’s faith. We’re more like to act like our friends and less likely to live according to God’s Word, which tells us that it is the means that matters. This research paints a compelling picture that moral values are shifting very quickly and significantly *within* the Christian community as well as outside of it.”¹ Is it any wonder why moral and ethical disagreements are more prevalent today? Discussions are much more polarizing in our society today.

Sadly, that pervasive attitude isn’t limited to the west. It’s more and more prevalent across the world, as we become used to having things the way we want, on demand, at the lowest cost and commitment possible. Graham is a friend of mine who lived in Nairobi, Kenya and works in South Sudan. Graham was a field director for World Vision. Fifteen years ago, when Graham first began working in the Sudan, he spoke with starving parents about their children. The children were malnourished, but the parents would give each child a bite or two of food first; the adults would eat what was left over. Today, that situation is changed. Now, parents eat first, the oldest children eat and then the youngest children are able to lick the plate and spoon, seeking any

¹ <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/144-a-new-generation-of-adults-bends-moral-and-sexual-rules-to-their-liking>

nourishment that might be left over. I’m not telling you this story to pronounce judgment on today’s parents versus the parents of 15, 30 or 60 years ago. Instead, this story illustrates the challenges we have as humans, living in a world that glorifies “getting away with it.” Morals and ethics are symptoms of a greater problem: **how are we to live?**

That question is true for every generation. It was true before Jesus’ time, true during Jesus’ lifetime and true every single day since. It will be true tomorrow, next week, next year and 100 years from now.

How are we to live?

How do we live when the majority of the people in the world have no access to clean water or regular, safe food sources, much less internet access? How do we live when more than a billion people don’t know how to read or write? Personalizing it, how do we live in the United States when our country ranks 26th out of 27 developed nations as regards economic equality and freedom? How do we live when child poverty is growing by leaps and bounds in the U.S., while dropping in many other parts of the world? How do we live when employers tell you that you are either: not qualified for a job, over-qualified for a job, or you don’t have enough experience for them to hire you for a job? How do we live when the official unemployment rates between 2009-13 for whites is 7% compared to 13% for Hispanics and 18% for blacks?² How do we live when people with high school diplomas and college degrees can’t find work and are moving home, putting pressure on family relationships and finances? How do we live when we are marginally employed, working part-time at a job just to bring in some income, but working at a job we feel no passion for? How do we live in a world filled with diseases, transmitted in so many ways across borders and boundaries? How do we live in a world battling HIV/AIDS, Ebola, drug-resistant tuberculosis, SARs, Alzheimer’s and cancer?

You know there isn’t really an easy answer to any of those questions. But I think there is an answer. It doesn’t focus on short-term performance and tasks. The answer is found in the mountain top experience of three of Jesus’ disciples, which we find in Mark 9:2-9.

² <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/charts/unemployment-by-race-and-ethnicity/>

The answer is so amazing it “blew the minds” of the disciples. And it continues to amaze and startle us today. It’s the kind of thing that makes your hair stand on end.

What has happened so far in the book of Mark? Before ascending the mountain, in Mark 8, there has been an amazing conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Peter made a stunning statement, confessing Jesus is the Messiah. Swearing the disciples to silence, Jesus predicted his own death, which led Peter to object and Jesus to rebuke him. Jesus then called to the crowd and the disciples and said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it”* (Mark 8:34-35). Jesus makes a promise that some disciples will see the kingdom of God and that’s exactly what happens (9:1).

Jesus takes three disciples – Peter, James and John, to the top of a mountain. Once they are there, a change takes place that blows their minds. Jesus is transformed right there in front of them, filled with a brilliant light. Even his clothes turn a dazzling white. To make things even more amazing, Moses and Elijah appear and they are having a conversation with Jesus. If you’ve been to a movie in the last twenty years, you know what this is: it’s the “preview of coming attractions.” You see glimpses of the full-length feature coming soon – a full life, and it either entices you to learn more and attend, or it pushes you away.

What’s the response of Peter, James and John? Mark tells us they were terrified and overwhelmed by what they were experiencing. We know Peter was out of his mind because of the foolish things he said. Peter didn’t understand what he was seeing. His mind couldn’t accept or keep up with what was revealed, so what did he do? Like many of us, he put his mouth in gear and promptly inserted his foot, sandal and all! He was trying to prolong things so he can figure out what to do.

Daniel Akin uses the phrase “God incognito” to describe the situation the disciples were in. They knew the stories about Jesus’ baptism. They had heard Jesus’ profound and puzzling words. They had even experienced Jesus’ power and authority over the natural and spiritual

realms in the miracles he did. But, even with all that help, it was hard for them to look at the simple, homely figure of gentle, loving Jesus and see the King of Kings. They couldn't see the Messiah. All they could see was Jesus, the son of Joseph, who was formerly a carpenter and who was now their teacher and leader, the one who was promising a change in the nation of Israel. They couldn't see Jesus for who and what he really is, the Son of God. And they had no idea what the Messiah had really come to do. We have that same struggle today, but it's compounded by the fact that we can't actually follow Jesus in person. We have to rely on God's Word, our experience and the experiences of others, such as the disciples and Gospel writers.

God blew the disciples' minds that day when he pulled back the veil and showed them a glimpse of the kingdom of God and the true nature of Jesus as Christ. God does the same thing for us today – revealing the answer to the question “how do we live?” God is present in the cloud, like the OT stories. The cloud is the shekinah-glory of God. It reveals God is present when Jesus is present. God reveals his love in the one who came to fulfill God's Law, the basis for the Old Testament. Jesus is also the one who came by God's grace, out of love for us and for all of creation. God is the one who interrupts Peter's foolish comments to proclaim Jesus' heavenly origin. And God interrupts our “me-first” monologue when we encounter Christ. In one instant, the cloud is there and God commands us to listen to Jesus. In the next instant, Jesus and the disciples are standing there alone on top of the mountain. We are there with them, for meeting Jesus is a “mountain top” experience in our life, a unique time when we are close to God.

God revealed Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. Jesus is above Moses and Elijah. They came to reveal God's truth, while Jesus came to give us what we really need. **Jesus came to save us. And he does.**

Jesus saves us when we have filthy water to drink and our food is bad. Jesus saves us when we can't read, write, hear or speak. Jesus saves us when we are bound by economic or real shackles. Jesus saves us no matter whether we are employed, unemployed or marginally employed. Jesus saves us regardless of our ethnic background, country of origin,

gender, age or sexual orientation. Jesus saves us, no matter what our family situation is. Jesus saves us when we battle apathy, depression, addiction or other mental and emotional challenges. Jesus saves us from illness and disease. Jesus offers comfort and peace to us every moment of our life, if we will reach out to him and accept it.

All you have to do is make a decision. You have to look at Jesus and see who he really is. That means looking for yourself and not relying on the opinion of others. Examine the evidence found in the Bible, the church and the experiences of others and make your own decision. And you have to listen to Jesus when he speaks to you. I think it’s amazing that in this most profound, mind-blowing event, the only two voices we hear are Peter and God. Jesus doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t have to because it’s said for him. The best way to listen to Jesus is to have a conversation with him. Find a quiet place and speak to Jesus directly from your heart. Most of all, take time in that quiet place to listen to him. Jesus will speak to you and you will know the joy of God’s love. Jesus was transformed when he was caught up, and bathed in, the love, power and kingdom of God. It transformed his whole being with light in the same way that music transforms simple words into a song. We hear Jesus when we, too, are transformed by the power of God’s love through God’s sanctifying grace.

According to N.T. Wright, one of the best things about being a science teacher is the day the students get to look through a microscope for the very first time to see something they never expected. What seemed dull, boring and lifeless becomes full of pattern, color and interest. As a former astronomy teacher, I can tell you the same is true for people the first time they get to use a telescope to look at a summer sky, far away from the lights of a city. And the same is true when we open God’s Word and read it for ourselves, meeting Christ through the Spirit. The veil is pulled back. Microscopes reveal the hidden world around us. Telescopes transform the night sky, revealing the world above us. God reveals Christ through the power of the Spirit, changing the heart and mind within us, transforming us and making us into a new creation.

I pray as we enter the season of Lent that you will prepare your hearts and minds. May God blow your mind as Christ’s love for you is revealed. There’s good news: the love of Christ doesn’t depend on how good you are, your attitude or occupation, or even what your plans might be. God loves you regardless. All Jesus wants is for you to see him, listen to him and be in relationship with him. God will take care of the rest. I invite you to join us this Ash Wednesday as we begin a 40-day time of renewal in Christ’s love as we listen to Jesus together.

Sending with Blessing Mark 9:49

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you restore its saltiness? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Go in peace and prepare yourselves to serve the Lord. Amen.

Psalm 50:1-6 (NRSV)

The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: “Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!” The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge. *Selah*

Mark 9:2-9 (NRSV)

Six 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, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then 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.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As 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.