

My sister's cat, Samson, is (despite his name) the definition of a scaredy-cat. Even though he has a nice indoor cat life, and my family does everything possible to spoil him, he is afraid of pretty much anything and everything. Being an indoor cat, he rarely ends up outside. I'm sure it's totally overwhelming for him! Everything is unfamiliar, strange smells, strange things moving everywhere, the cars on the highway by our house, the breeze, maybe even the sky. It's terrifying for the poor little guy, and he clings to whoever is holding him like they're his last available hope!

Are you ready for Wednesday? Maybe you still have some flowers to order or a date to arrange, but I think you probably know that's not what I'm talking about. This year Valentine's Day corresponds with another holiday, one with a longer lasting effect: Ash Wednesday. Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent, which will last until Easter Sunday on April first. In those long weeks we watch our Savior descend into humiliation and suffering. We compare our thoughts, words, and actions, our lives as a whole to what God expects of us and see how horribly far we've fallen short of the mark. It's unfamiliar, upsetting, and, frankly, terrifying. I don't think it's an overreaction if we feel a little bit like Samson and want someone or something to hang on to!

Today we celebrate another holiday though, Transfiguration! Today we have the final high point before taking the plunge into Lent, and we will find that the truths we learn from the events Mark records for us are just what we need to hang on to.

I can't even imagine what it must have been like to be Mark, hearing about what happened up on that mountain and recording what Peter or James or John told him. It's even harder to try to imagine being Peter, James, or John! But, let's try. You've been following Jesus for a couple years now, and you're convinced he is the Son of God, the Savior promised in the Bible, even though sometimes you don't quite understand that yourself. You've seen your friend and teacher, Jesus, do amazing miracles, turning water into wine, healing sick and handicapped people, and you've even seen him throw out demons! Still, you're not quite sure how he is going to become the glorious Savior-King the Scriptures promised, because he still seems like a carpenter's son more than anything, sure, a wise-beyond-human-wisdom carpenter's son who does miracles, but still, a long shot from a ruling king. The Romans and their puppet governors are still in charge, after all. Lately, though, he's started saying strange things about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, but that can't be right.

One day he takes you and his other two closest disciples up on a high mountain to have some quiet time in prayer. Jesus begins to pray. Maybe it's because of the climb or maybe it's because you've been working so hard over the last few months following Jesus, but your eyes are getting heavy, you're maybe even starting to drift off to sleep when suddenly you look up and see Jesus completely transformed! You knew he was God, but now you're seeing it with your own eyes! His face shining as bright as the sun, his clothes unnaturally white, his holiness and splendor are in your face, undeniable. On top of that, standing right there in front of you, talking to Jesus, are Moses and Elijah! You catch some of their conversation. They're talking about what Jesus is going to accomplish in Jerusalem. It's all too much. It's too wonderful and terrifying! You blurt out something stupid about it being good to be there and setting up tents so you can stay. While you're still saying that, a bright light and cloud surround you, just like the cloud you heard about on Mount Sinai and entering the Tabernacle in Moses' time, and you hear God the Father himself say *"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

It's too much. Your knees buckle and you're on the ground, shaking with fear. God is here! He knows how flawed you are and how terrible you've been. There's no way he doesn't. There's no way you can survive this. As you're despairing, you feel a hand on your shoulder. You hear Jesus' voice, "*Get up. Don't be afraid.*" You look up and all the splendor is gone. All you see is your dear friend Jesus as you've always known him. Familiar, friendly, the face you love.

On that mountain somewhere in Caesarea, something amazing happened. Jesus demonstrated his divine nature in an undeniable way. It was probably pretty easy for the disciples to understand that he was truly human, after all, they lived with him day to day and saw him living as a human. On the mountain, he proved he was true God and the Promised Savior. No one else could appear the way Jesus did. When Moses left the presence of God in the Old Testament, we hear that his face was radiant with the reflection of God's glory. Jesus' face shown from within, a revelation of his divine nature. His whiter than white clothes showed his holiness and perfection. Everything about his appearance screamed, "This is almighty God!"

But that wasn't all. Moses and Elijah were there too, representatives of the Old Testament testifying to the truth that he was the Savior they had written about. Jesus wasn't just here on a whim. He wasn't just God here to visit, but God here to complete the plan he had spoken of in Scriptures all along.

And on top of all that, God the Father appeared in a brilliant cloud around them, just like he had appeared many times in the Old Testament. It would've been as unmistakable for the disciples on the mountain as it is for us today. When he spoke, "*This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!*" God declared Jesus' divinity to the disciples and assured them of three things: Jesus is my Son. He is God. I love him, so I approve of what he is doing, and you should listen to him. What he says is true. Today, on Transfiguration, we celebrate who Jesus is: true God, with all the splendor, holiness, and dazzling glory that comes with being true God!

Is this how you picture Jesus? When you pray, is this who you imagine praying to? Or does he usually look like the statue here on the altar? Altar statue Jesus is definitely who I picture. We know that Jesus is almighty God just like Peter, James, and John certainly did. We know he loves us like they did. I think that if he appeared to us today in his glory like he did to them, we'd have exactly the same reaction of terror that they did too. Don't you? Imagine Jesus standing there before you in all his holy splendor and glory. Perfection that proclaims, "I am just! The soul that sins is the one who will die! The wages of sin is death!" Brighter and clearer than a billboard saying, "I know what you did last night." "I heard what you were saying the other day." "I know your darkest thoughts that you can't even admit to your closest friends." Glory that shows just how dirty and unworthy and wretched we are in our sinfulness. It would be unbearable. We might even blurt out some silly things like Peter did in our terror. "What do I have to do to make it up to you?" "I'll try so hard to be good for you!"

If he were here terrifying us today, Jesus would treat us the same way he treated Peter, James, and John. He'd come over to us, touch us on the shoulder and say the phrase that comes up more often than any other in the Bible. Do you know what it is? "Don't be afraid."

As terrifying as it can be to picture Jesus as holy and almighty God in all his splendor as we do on Transfiguration, as wild as it is to realize that it wasn't a temporary state, but a glimpse of who he truly is, even right now today, it is because Jesus is holy and almighty God that we don't have to fear. God commands us to be as holy as he is in order to earn eternal life and we fall far short of that,

Mark 9:2-9

*Hang on to this!*

*By Paul Wilde*

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dooming ourselves. We need a Savior to follow those laws for us. We get Jesus, born completely human so that he'd be under the same requirements we are. But if he was just human, it wouldn't be enough. Even if he could live a perfect life as only a human (which would have been impossible!), it would have only counted for him. He would have saved himself, but no one else. It's the fact that he's truly and completely God as well that allowed him to live his life perfectly and allowed him to serve as the substitute for all people. It's how God was able to pour out on him the punishment for every single person. As much as it can terrify us as sinners, as believers, we rejoice in the knowledge that Jesus is God!

Why do you think God revealed Jesus to the disciples like this at transfiguration? Well, they were about to experience some extremely hard times leading up to probably the worst experience of their lives, Jesus' execution on Golgotha. They needed something to hang on to through those hard times. Over the next weeks of Lent, we will hear the stories of what they saw: Jesus mocked, rejected, and beaten. It must have looked to them like he was all but defeated.

Instead of giving up hope though, the disciples could look back to what they saw on the mountain, and remember that Jesus is God, perfect, undefeatable, and loving. What a beautiful hope to hang on to in dark times! We can hang on to it as well! Whenever you feel defeated by your sin, whenever you feel like the light of faith is going out in the world, whenever you feel like the Gospel is all but beaten, whenever you face hardship and everything seems scary, unfamiliar, or threatening, remember that your Jesus, that dear brother and friend you pray to, is almighty God with all the power and love that comes with it! Friends, as we face our sufferings and sinfulness in Lent, don't despair! Jesus our Savior is God! He's holy, powerful, and glorious. He has the approval and love of God our Heavenly Father! And he loves you! Don't be afraid! Hang on to this! Amen.