

**2 Kings 2:1-12**

**Psalm 50:1-6**

**2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

**Mark 9:2-9**

Sermon for Feb 11, 2024

## **THE BEST GUIDE**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Wherever he leads I'll go.

Life, as we all know, is complicated. Every day, every hour even, presents us with different choices, and time being what it is, and our lives being linear, we have to make each one of those choices, and accept whatever consequences result from that choice, while the future that would have resulted from any other choice is lost to us forever, disappears into the vague regions of 'what might have been.' Some of those choices are seemingly trivial and inconsequential – what to have for dinner tonight, what shoes to wear today, which route to take into work – while others, on the face of them at least, are much more important: whom to marry, whether to have children, what sort of education to pursue, and so on.

And I think most of us, if we're being honest, would acknowledge that at least some of the choices we made were the wrong choices. Many of mine certainly were. The problem for most of us, of course, is that we cannot see into the future, we cannot see the consequences that must inevitably follow on the life path onto which those choices necessarily lead us, and the reason we choose wrongly is that we have no one we can trust to tell us which choice would be best. We don't have a reliable guide, to lead us through our lives.

And I think the reason, for most of us, why we don't have a reliable guide is that such guides are few and far between. They are few and far between because there are two qualifications for such a guide, and most of us don't have many people in our lives who satisfy those two qualifications.

What are those qualifications? The first is that the guide would know more than we do, be wiser than we are, and the second, and far more important qualification, is that the guide have our best interest at heart, that they know us and love us and want nothing short of the best for us.

I talked a couple of weeks ago about how lucky I was to stumble across a man named Mark Rippetoe to serve as a guide in gaining strength. He was a good guide because he knew far more than I did about how to gain strength, and even though he did not know me personally, he was clearly motivated to help people like me, he had our best interest at his heart.

And that's fine for gaining strength, but what about guides for the much larger and most important objective of leading a full and satisfying and fruitful life?

When we are young children, nature has provided most of us with guides who more-or-less satisfy those qualifications, namely our parents. But once we outgrow the orbit of their influence, such guides become few and far between. Many of us never find another, and are left to fend for ourselves, as we proceed to face the choices that will shape the greater part of our lives.

And so far, we've only been talking about our earthly lives, our earthly careers, our earthly relationships, our earthly fulfillment and fruitfulness. The problem becomes far more acute when we extend our concern to our eternal lives, our eternal careers, our eternal relationships, our eternal fulfillment and fruitfulness.

Where do we find a guide for eternity who satisfies the two qualifications, who is both much wiser than we are, and far more importantly, who loves us with an eternal love, who wants nothing less than the eternal best for each of us?

Our gospel selection for today gives us the answer. So let's read it together.

Mark 9: 2-9.

Let's review the scene. We are well along in Christ's earthly ministry, probably more than halfway through it, and there comes a time when Jesus takes his three closest disciples – Peter, of course, and the brothers James and John: the three who have been with him from the very first – he leads them away from the others and up onto a high hill where they can be alone.

Characteristically, Mark doesn't give the reader a lot of detail about what happened on the top of the hill, because he wants all our attention focused on the central incident. There comes a moment when the three disciples see their teacher, Jesus, in conversation with two men, and – although again Mark doesn't tell us how this happened – somehow they are able to identify the two men as Moses and Elijah, both of whom have of course been dead for hundreds of years.

And these weren't just any two figures from the past. To devoutly religious Jews like Christ's disciples, Moses and Elijah were the two most important pillars of Jewish life. To these three young men, all of their lives rested on the foundation of their Hebrew scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – and those scriptures themselves stood on two legs, what the Jews referred to the Law and the Prophets.

And who was Moses but the Lawgiver, the one God had used to communicate God's great body of Law to His chosen people? And who was Elijah but the first and therefore most important of the Prophets, the only one who never died, but who was escorted directly to heaven, as our passage from 2 Kings reports?

Or in other words, the two men the disciples identified speaking with Jesus represented to them everything – literally everything – upon which their lives had been based, the ultimate guides of their lives, those who had always taken absolute priority in all their thoughts and actions, in the lives of their families, and in the life of their nation.

It's only by trying to realize how important these two figures would have been to Peter and John and James that we can appreciate the full significance of what happens next.

In a sort of confused awe, Peter offers what would have seemed to him the greatest possible tribute he could even conceive of to his teacher, the young man from Nazareth. “Rabbi,” he says, “shall we construct three tents here for the three of you?” Without going into the significance of building tents, what we want to notice here is that Peter is including Jesus into the company of the other two, of Moses and Elijah. He's treating Jesus as their equal. Or in other words, he's willing to accept this young teacher from Nazareth as one of the pillars of life itself, as Peter understood that life. He was offering Jesus the greatest honor it was within his – Peter's – power to comprehend, even to imagine.

But notice, and here's the important thing, notice what happens next. The very presence of God draws near in a cloud, and the very voice of God speaks into this

scene. The God who through Moses had given the Law, and the God who through the prophets had interpreted and applied the Law, the very God who stood behind and under the authority of the Law and the Prophets speaks into this scene, and what does God say?

He says: "This is my Son. Listen to Him."

In the parable of the wicked tenants that Jesus Himself offered on another occasion, the owner of the vineyard sends a series of messengers to collect the rent, but when they fail, the owner thinks: "Well, I'll send my son. Surely they'll listen to him."

And that's exactly what God is telling Peter and James and John, up on this mountain. "Your teacher is not like the others. You are not to include him among them. You are not simply to add him to the others guides in your life. This is my Son. From now on, you will listen to Him; from now on, you will follow Him."

In other words, what God is teaching these three disciples is that, in order to be obedient to God's will, what they would have to do was shift their alliance from their old way of thinking and their old rules, and redirect themselves to an entirely new way of leading their lives, one in which Jesus was now the guide. If they were to enjoy the new wine that God was now providing, they would have to throw away the old wine skins.

As Mark told us in the very first passages of His gospel, the message on which Jesus based his whole ministry was "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand." The word "Repent" actually means "Change your mind. Put away your old way of thinking and take on this new way that I bring."

And here on the mount of transfiguration, we see the full-blooded illustration of that same message. "Your old ways of thinking had Moses and Elijah as their guide," God tells the three disciples. "But that's over. They were my messengers, but this is my Son. Change your way of thinking and teaching and living, and listen to Him: go where he goes, think as he thinks, live as he lives."

And the same message applies to us today as Christians, the same message delivered to those early disciples on that hill a long time ago.

Most of us of course don't have Moses and Elijah at the center of our lives. Most of us have something else. It might be politics, hobbies, our families, our business,

our social life, it might be drugs or alcohol, it might be our friends, it might be our health or our appearance. It might be the pursuit of power or fame. It might be the ambition to do good, and make a positive difference in the world. And it is these priorities, whatever they are, that we have always accepted as our guides, when it comes to making the decisions that have shaped and continue to shape our lives.

But here's the rub. Those priorities and those who guide us in their pursuit do not generally have our eternal well-being at heart; and even when they do, they lack the heavenly wisdom to guide us towards heavenly well-being

The deep message of the Mount of Transfiguration is that it doesn't matter what the center of your life is, whether it's good or bad or indifferent. As long as it does not flow from Christ as **its** center, it is outside of God's will. And the audience that can profit the most from it, I think, are those whose lives are centered on things of which Christ approves, but which are not Christ Himself.

If the disciples had seen Jesus standing next to Satan, what God said would have been true but trivial.

But God showed the disciples something much more difficult than that. He showed them Jesus standing with others who represented all that was the very best and noblest their understanding could comprehend. He showed them the very best and highest that humanity has to offer, and yet he turned and pointed at Jesus and he said, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

And that simple message, I think, is both the beginning and the end of the Christian life.

And so, gracious God, our prayer this morning, based on this understanding of what Jesus did in the Mount of Transfiguration, is that you strengthen us to examine our own lives, and where we find anything drawing on our devotion more strongly than does Christ, we ask that you forgive us, and reorient us by enlightening the eyes of our hearts, that we may come to see and appreciate how all good things depend on Christ, and all good things receive their strength and their beauty from his nourishment, and all good things find their eternal meaning and fulfillment in and through him, who is far wiser than we will ever be in the ways of eternity, and who loves us with an everlasting and unchanging love, and in whose name we pray.