

## LIVING THE KINGDOM IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

*By Dr. John Armstrong*

Mark 9:1-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! It's my joy, as it has been many times over the years to come to speak to you at University Bible Fellowship in Chicago. Like so many Sundays, our hearts still long to be together. But in this virtual context, we're still able to speak to one another and encourage one another in these trying times.

As I pondered this wonderful invitation to speak to you, I was struck by the words of the account in the gospel of Mark of Jesus being transfigured on Mount Tabor. The account of the transfiguration is central to the life and ministry and kingdom of Jesus. And yet for many of us the transfiguration exists in a kind of mist almost a dark cloud when it comes to our understanding the significance of this event for our Christian faith. I want to read the gospel of Marks' account of the Transfiguration in Ch.9, and then you'll see why I've chosen this text for my message for you today. I begin by reading from Mark chapter 9 and verse 1 (NRSV): <sup>1</sup> And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." <sup>2</sup> 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, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" <sup>8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. <sup>11</sup> Then they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" <sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? <sup>13</sup> But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him." The word of the Lord.

In March of this year, our lives were collectively and personally changed. Life as we knew it in America and in many parts of the world this is also true, came to an end. Not to an end that ended all of our lives in some cataclysm, but to an end that has cost almost 175,000 Americans their lives. An end that has infected over 5 million of us with a virus, whose implications we still don't fully understand even though many will recover from it and most will not have a bad case. This pandemic as we now call it—a pandemic it is. But what does the word pandemic even mean? Well you can hear in the word itself. It comes from the word pandemonium. It's a form of panic

and that's what many Americans have felt. Panic. Pandemonium. A pandemic is a panic because of a disease that becomes prevalent over a whole country. In this case over the world. Now this is not the first pandemic. And many are reminding us will it will not be the last. We have experienced many other pandemics in the world before the year 2020 brought by a virus: SARS, Mad Cow disease, and other such diseases have been dodged as it were because of our public health response. But there's still such challenges to our health that exist and will exist. COVID-19 which is the particular virus that has caused this pandemic is a novel 2019 coronavirus, which is now called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome CoronaVirus-2 or SARS-COVID-2. It's a flu-type virus, that creates an infection that affects our respiratory and lungs and can lead to death as we know. Infectious diseases have likely caused more premature deaths in history than any single cause. When you think of the plagues of ancient history and of modern times, you understand that human history has expressed the fragility of our life and death when such plagues come into our lives.

I think of several historic plagues such as the plague of Justinian in 541-542 C.E. 30-50 million people are said to have died from this plague. It had waves that continued to affect for several more centuries down to approximately 750 C.E., 200 years. The Black Death caused 200 million deaths and in fact most don't realize that The Black Death which began in about 1600 has continued in various waves to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Only in the last century did the Black Death finally come to an end. Another plague was small pox. 56 million people emerged through the last centuries with small pox. We now have a vaccine for it. The one that's probably the best known is the Spanish flu. We've heard a lot about it in this time of COVID-19. The Spanish flu took the lives of 40-50 million people globally. And though the dates of the Spanish flu are often misunderstood, it extended roughly from Jan 1918, roughly the end of WWI, to Dec 1920, almost 3 full years. The pandemic of our lifetime has been HIV AIDS. 32 million estimated deaths from the 1980s to the present. It may have emerged as early as 1920. But it became a scourge, that began to kill particularly those in the gay community in the 1980s. These are just some of the pandemics of viruses and various diseases that have caused massive suffering and death in human history.

But the question many Christians ask today is: Why has this pandemic emerged now in 2020? Perhaps more importantly Christians have asked: What is God saying to us through this pandemic? Now it's that question I want to address with you today, the question of what God is saying to us. You see, the ancient world was filled with ideas about how earthquakes and volcanoes and fires and plagues came about. Most of ancient civilization believed that these massive threats to human life were caused because humans had sinned against the gods, and the gods were angry, and this was their judgment. Is that how we should understand this pandemic? Well if I'm to listen to many Christians, it is. Now they've refined that to say it is the God who is the Creator, the God of Jesus Christ, the Father of Jesus Christ our Savior. They've gone so far as to say this God is a God of holiness and judgment, and this is God's judgment. Is this true? Is this the way we should understand the Scriptures and how they speak to times like these?

Well as I read the prophets of the Old Testament, and I've been reading them quite a bit in recent months, I see one common theme in response to plagues, pandemics and massive suffering. It's the response of the prophetic tradition that we call: lament. Now I'm persuaded that few American Christians understand what lament means. We're so ebullient, we're so hopeful, we have made so many advances in science, medicine, technology, education that we somehow have lost connection as Christians to lamentation. The Bible is filled with lamentation—the psalms, the prophets, there's a book called Lamentations itself, of course. But if we jump to ready solutions about why questions, we very likely will fail to lament as we should. So what I want to say first today is this: We will not lament as we should if our reactions to questions about what and why are not only wrongly formed but particularly they are wrongly answered. We misread Jesus and his kingdom and as a result we misread the so-called signs of the times.

Now there are words as you know well that jump off the pages of Scripture at the discerning reader. One such word when you read the New Testament is the word Kingdom. This is the word used in all four gospels but particularly in the synoptics of Matthew, Mark and Luke to describe what Jesus came to do. To bring his kingdom, to introduce his kingdom, to draw people into his kingdom, to give us the message of the kingdom, the gospel or good news of the kingdom, Mark calls it in Mark 1:15. This is what Jesus came preaching: the kingdom.

What is the kingdom? Well in contemporary English the word kingdom actually refers to a place, a land, a king has his own land, his own place that he rules over. But the Greek word *basileia* which Mark uses as do the other synoptic gospel writers, is a word better translated with the word "activity." The kingdom of God is the place where divine activity is happening. Words like "reign" or "rule" are closer to the meaning of kingdom in the gospels. Thus Mark can say in chapter 1, "The kingdom has drawn (come) near." He's saying something like this, "God is asserting his rule in this world, and Jesus has come to introduce us to this kingdom as it breaks into human civilization and human context."

What kind of rule does the kingdom bring through Jesus Christ our Lord? Well it's good news. It's gospel. It's good news that says that the usual patterns of history no longer define what God is doing in the world. Now hear that again. The patterns of rule that we think about in the world no longer apply because the King has come. He has come into human history. And his coming has made the profound difference in how we understand the unfolding of events in human history. This reign of Jesus brought to Israel the good news of their Messiah who was their Redeemer. But when the King is crowned, he will not bring about a reign of domination. This is important. When Jesus is crowned King in his ascension, after his death and resurrection, he is not crowned King to dominate, to control. No, his reign has come as deliverance. He is come to heal the sick, to cast out demons, and to heal those who are broken-hearted, and who are sick and who are in need of a Savior. He has come to bring that rule, that gracious, merciful rule, so that Luke 11:20 can say, "It is by the finger of God," Jesus said, "that I cast out demons. Then, if this is so, the kingdom of God has come to you." God's finger, God's rule cast out demons. And if so, he has come to deliver the oppressed. 2 Corinthians 5:20 tells us in what way Paul understood the coming of this kingdom [2Co 5:20, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.] Luke

says further in 9:2 that Jesus sent out his disciples to “proclaim the kingdom and to heal.” Where you see the good news, you see healing, you see restoration from the power of sin and death, and you see the kingdom breaking into our present reality. Jesus therefore taught his disciples to pray, “your kingdom come.”

Professor Wesley Hill, a theologian and teacher of New Testament at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA, has said that Jesus is teaching us: “Father, make your healing reign more and more tangible and visible in our world. Let your rule assert itself ever more concretely in the places where sickness and evil seem to have the upper hand.” Professor Hill is saying this: the rule of Jesus is to enter where the sick are and the broken and the weak and the suffering, to heal and to restore. Not always physically, though sometimes yes, but to restore the broken spirit, to restore the lonely heart, to minister to people in the grip of a pandemic. So, where is the kingdom of God? Well, Jesus says in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Marks’ gospel, “it’s within you.”

Now, this brings us to our text in Mark 9 verses 1-13 that I’ve already read. This account of the Transfiguration—which you may say at this point, “What does this have to do with what you said about the kingdom of God?”—this account is truly one of the most amazing and overlooked accounts in the Scripture of the redemptive, glorious work of Jesus.

Often we strip away the implication of an account like this in times like these by various popular Christian and non-Christian responses. Let me just give you a few. Probably the most prominent among non-Christians and unfortunately many Christians, are various kinds of conspiracy theories. We’ve heard in the last weeks of a massive conspiracy theory called QAnon. It’s not only politically dangerous it’s spiritually deadly. But it’s believed by many religious and non-religious people in our world.

Another popular thing to do right now is blame China, call it the China flu. Blame China for not telling us all that they knew. It may be true. But the blame game never solves anything, and it certainly isn’t the work of the kingdom.

Probably the most popular one for many Christians in the last hundred years in America culture is to look to the end of the age, the end of the world, the apocalypse, and say, “This is preparation. This may be the clock that’s ticking down to the return of Jesus.” It’s always puzzled me that people are so sure that something is a clock ticking down to the coming of Jesus when Jesus said, “No man knows the day or the hour (18:09)—(18:14) only the Father knows and the Son doesn’t know,” which itself raises some very interesting questions—then how on earth do you know my friend when Jesus is coming back and what signs point to that being very near?

Another response is some form of ancient Platonism. Of course, Platonism is the philosophy that was taught and developed from Plato. Basically, Platonism which is still very popular with American religious people who are not rooted in Scripture, is the idea that: well you live, you have purpose and when you die, off you go into eternity. Most people will say off you go to heaven and they’ll talk about how someone is looking down on them right now. Little thought is put into this kind of eschatology but it’s believed by multitudes.

But here's another popular one, and maybe some of you have thought about this and even wondered about it. It goes like this: this is a great time of evangelistic opportunity. Now people will listen. Their hearts will be opened. Their minds will be accepting. We can teach the Bible. They're ready for our teaching. Let me say very simply: Don't count on it. Just because people face difficulty does not necessarily make them more open to truth.

Or perhaps, the last would be something like this: we quote the Old Testament and borrow from the idea of angry gods and judgment and we produce a Christian version of an angry God who holds sinners in his hands, and is about to cast them in the pit of fire if they don't repent. And that this is our message in times like these to tell people about hell and judgment and the need to repent because this is what they need to hear right now.

Now I want to suggest to you that all of these that I've briefly mentioned are various kinds of Christianized knee-jerk reactions. Most of them have an element of truth, but that element of truth has to bear the weight of an error of a false conclusion. We need to think more biblically, about redemptive history, about human history and about our time in that history. So how do we do that? Well, I suggest to you that this account of the Transfiguration provides the very kind of story, the very kind of event, that defines our times and guides us into how we should speak in a pandemic. Now, notice just a couple things about the text. If I had read more of chapter 8 of Mark you would've heard Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Then that account of Peter's confession is followed by a declaration of Jesus that he would have to die and rise. Now clearly, in the account of Mark 9 about the Transfiguration the disciples were told that he was going to die when he told them not to go out and tell people about what they experienced—Peter, James and John. And they treasured this, and they kept that commitment not to tell, but what they pondered was this idea that he would die and be raised—a theme we frequently see in the gospels that they didn't understand this, even though Jesus clearly told them.

But one thing is abundantly clear: Peter, James and John, and the other disciples would be allowed to "see" the kingdom of God come in all its glory. And what they experience here is the glory of the life to come. They experience the radiance, the glorification, the eternality, the bright light of God's kingdom consummated, final in the age to come when Jesus wraps up human history in his own redemptive work and person. And from heaven in our text you heard the Father speak, "This is my beloved Son. In Him I am well pleased."

So what did the disciples see on Mount Tabor? I suggest to you that what they saw in this text that I've read this morning, is the unveiled divinity and the full, effulgent glory of Jesus Christ. If you ask what will it be like to see Him and fall on our faces and be redeemed finally and fully in the new heavens and the new earth, what will the glory be?

There's a hymn, I love it: "Oh that will be glory for me." What will that glory be? Well here it is. Transformed, radiant, full, complete, human. The unveiled divinity and glory of Christ. The church fathers when they read this text in the early centuries, saw the Trinity here: the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is transfigured in their midst, and the Holy Spirit is involved in the events in

the guidance that follows. Such church fathers said there are only two places in the gospel where the Trinity is specifically named: here and at the baptism of Jesus. Interesting. That makes this I submit a very important part of redemptive, biblical history.

So I want to suggest to you today that any attempt to make Jesus' words about seeing the kingdom mean that he's referring to the Second Advent here, could not be more wrong. You see, some have read this text about Jesus saying that there would be those here who would not die before they see this glory, that it means that some disciples would not die before Jesus comes again. In fact, most of my life I've heard people argue this point and advance this point. But it is clearly foreign to the text when you pay attention to it. It is not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is saying that these disciples had seen the glory and therefore what he promised had taken place on that mountain.

But the Christian culture of many conservative Christians in America has seen salvation and glory and the coming of Jesus as entirely personal. It's about me. It's about my going to heaven. It's about my experiencing the glory of God when I get there. But that's not what this is about. You noticed he took three disciples. It's about the people of God. It's about the kingdom of God. And so we need to realize that the gospel of personal salvation has a place, yes indeed--we need to be personally born of the Spirit; we need to be saved. But that gospel of salvation in the Bible is not simply a personal redemption project that gets me into heaven when I die. This is a false idea and it goes bad because it doesn't stay with the gospel of the kingdom. When Christian teachers insist that the gospel of the kingdom doesn't fit into this unbiblical model of personal salvation, many Christians get very upset. I've had Christians say to me, "Well, I don't think that's the gospel. It's about my sins being forgiven, Jesus coming into my heart, and going to heaven." Well, no it's not. That's a certain part of it. But when you make that the whole you've missed the gospel of the kingdom. You've embraced a Western individualism that puts the stress on you and your heart, and not on God's kingdom, God's people, and the glory of Jesus.

A richer account of redemption must follow the biblical direction of creation, incarnation and re-creation. Let me say that again. A biblical understanding of salvation must follow the Christian biblical themes of creation, incarnation and re-creation. The center of the gospel must follow the biblical story line, the narrative that reveals God's kingdom to us through Jesus and his gospel. Now, let's come back to the question about the pandemic. What does all of this have to do with the pandemic? Well let me suggest this response. Here, what we have is the ultimate sign that points us to the answer we need right now in the church. The gospels present Jesus as standing at the moment of a great transition in our text. He is summing up the entire ancient, prophetic tradition and re-expressing that prophetic message of judgment, and providence and a future for God's redeemed people in terms of the last great warning that he's going to give to Jerusalem and its inhabitants that judgment is coming. But that judgment that is coming on Jerusalem is coming because of their refusal to believe that Jesus and what he did on Golgotha was the means to enter God's kingdom. Jesus is urging Jerusalem to turn and to find peace, indeed to find peace for the city of Jerusalem. At the same time, he is pointing to a new world—new heavens and new earth. And he's doing so by directing them to the one true sign.

What is that sign? What is that sign that speaks better than any words we can construct to a time of pandemic. I suggest the gospels lead us to this answer: the sign is the sign of Jonah. You say, what? Yes, the sign of Jonah. Because Jonah's symbolic death and resurrection points us to the culmination, the fruition, the fulfillment of Jesus' kingdom and what is about to transpire just days after the transfiguration, when Jesus goes to Jerusalem and is taken like a lamb to his slaughter, to death, for us, and then on the third day he's raised and later he ascends into heaven. This is the sign. It goes something like this: Jesus is saying, "Look to the signs of your times, and to the skies and you will miss the kingdom." Look at the pandemic and try to explain it and you will miss what God is doing right now. He is not teaching a kind of realized eschatology that is so popular that says, This is that; here's how Scripture connects these events to these signs, these portents, these realities.

There is nothing new for us to know, my brothers and sisters, at this time, other than this: we must pray daily "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Yes, we must make this the constant and continual prayer guide for the whole church. I say again: you want to know how to pray as a church? Don't simply list a list and go through it and say, "We've had prayer." No, turn to the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray saying, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What are we praying for? We're praying that the reign of Jesus would come into us, into our hearts, into our families, into our work places, into our neighborhoods, into a time of pandemic. We're praying the kingdom of God would come through us, and in us, and with us, in such a way that the reign of Christ is clearly announced through our good works, through our good speech, through our good gospel, that people will see that God reigns. He's not abandoned the world. He's not throwing the world off. In fact, he's giving the world another chance to hear and us a chance to be obedient and to live the gospel of the kingdom.

Now let me finish with this. There's a lot of talk now as there always is in such times, of the sovereignty of God. And by this many refer to the secret counsel of the Lord, which is known only to Him as the Scripture says. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, those that are revealed belong to us and our children" (Dt 29:29). Very simply put, you do not know the sovereign, secret will of God, and so you ought to close the talk down and stop acting as if you do. What you do know is what God has revealed to you and to your children through the gospel, through Jesus. We are to be shaped by Jesus, shaped by the gospel, shaped by the redemptive events that bring all of this about, that we read about consistently in the records of the gospel. This is why the gospels are stories of Jesus over which half of the content is one long, as some have said, passion narrative. You've noticed in your reading of the Bible, right, that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are particularly, besides parables and miracles and a few stories, they're passion narratives. The principle focus is upon one thing: the dying of Jesus and the rising of Jesus. Why? That's how the kingdom comes! That's our response! That's our message! Don't get too complicated!

The myth, and it is a myth, that the early church stood on tiptoe looking for the second coming in a day or two or a month or two—and expected Jesus to come in the lifetime of most of these early Christians, is a myth I tell you. It is a popular one. It is a widely held one, but it is a myth! You

cannot find it in Scripture. It is proposed by theologians and popular Bible readers, but it is not what the Scripture says, and this text demonstrates that.

Western Christianity has managed because of its individual view of salvation and its emphasis on signs, and eschatology and the end of the age, and interpreting these signs of God's sovereignty, it has managed to ignore what Jesus actually told us to pray for and how to live. How then should we live in a pandemic? What should we say to our world?

I want to read a paragraph in closing. It's a wonderful little book by the way called, "God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath," by N.T. Wright. A simple 75-page book ends with this paragraph, and I want to read it: "It isn't for me to tell church leaders let alone leaders of other faith communities how they ought to be planning for the coming months. What they ought to be pressing upon our governments. Yet those of us who watch and wait and pray for our leaders in the church and state, must use this time of lament as a time of prayer and hope. What we hope for includes the wise, human leadership and initiative which will, like that of Joseph in Egypt—[that's wonderful, like Joseph in Egypt]—will bring about fresh and healing policies and actions across God's wide and wounded world."

This I tell you is our message, is our call. To bring about healing. To lay down our lives where it's appropriate and where we can and we should. Our health providers, our front line servants, our so-called heroes today, we even have what we call a Heroes Act. Yes, these are our heroes. But there beside them and with them ought to be the body of Christ, living the gospel of the kingdom, offering hope to those who suffer, and demonstrating that in the way we live in these difficult times. May God give to you, my dear brothers and sisters in Chicago, this wonderful message, this wonderful hope of God's kingdom in your hearts and our midst in a broken world to bring this message of redemptive healing in these times. May God help us to live and be a people of his kingdom. Amen.