

The Transfiguration of Our Lord: Matthew 17:1–9

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Preached for the Transfiguration, Year A · 2 March 2014

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Six days later, Peter, James and John saw just that: Jesus, the Son of Man, in the glory of His kingdom. It’s Transfiguration Sunday, the last of the Epiphany Sundays, the big epiphany where we hear of Jesus shining like the sun in the presence of Moses and Elijah. There’s much more to Jesus than meets the eye.

Peter, James, and John saw with their own eyes what we confess by faith. This Jesus, this carpenter-preacher from Nazareth, is “God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God.” They saw His glory, at least as much of it as they could handle, which isn’t very much.

John wrote about it in the prologue of the Gospel that bears his name: “We beheld His glory, the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Peter wrote in his second letter, “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:17). We don’t hear from James, because he didn’t live long enough to write anything, thanks to Herod. Obviously, the vision left quite an impression.

It would on most of us too, I’d imagine, once you got over the suspicion that you were seeing things or that this was something in your mind. The vision of transfigured Jesus is not like the so-called visions of Jesus or the Virgin Mary people see in the clouds or the burn marks on a tortilla or water stains on the wall. And group hallucinations are very unlikely. If it had been Peter alone, or James and John alone, we would be right to be a bit skeptical about the whole thing. “Are you sure you guys weren’t seeing things? Maybe the mountain light was playing tricks with your eyes.” That sort of thing. But to have three otherwise sane and rational men see the same vision, and two out of three write about it years later, tells you they actually saw

what they claimed to have seen: Jesus' face shining like the sun, His clothes shining with a dazzling, blinding light, and to top it all off, Moses and Elijah standing there with Jesus.

What's it all about? Let's start with shining Jesus. Unlike His miracles, this vision doesn't really benefit anyone, though it does scare the daylights out of Peter, James, and John. A "transfiguration" is a "metamorphosis," a change in outward appearance. It's the same Jesus they'd always seen, but His appearance changed. He glowed with the glory of God. It's not the first time someone glowed. Moses glowed. Every time he went up on the mountain to meet with God, Moses came back glowing. He was like one of those old "glow in the dark" watches that you put out in the sun and then it glows for a while in the dark. The key is "for a while." Moses glowed rather faintly for a while. The Israelites put a veil over Moses' face as the glow faded away.

Moses was like that glow in the dark watch. He glowed with a glory that was not his own, and it was fading, just like the covenant that Moses headed. It was a temporary covenant, fading, establishing a nation Israel for a while until the fullness of time when the Christ would come.

If Moses was the glow in the dark watch, then Jesus is the sun, the source of the light, the light itself. Moses reflected the light; Jesus is the light. Light of Light. When Jesus shined, the light was not coming from outside but from within, His divinity that was hidden "in, with, and under" His humanity. The glow of Jesus was the glow of His glory as the only Son of the Father. It's the glory that Moses longed to see on Mt. Sinai but wasn't permitted. It's the glory that Elijah wanted to see in his time of discouragement when Queen Jezebel was trying to kill him.

This is the hidden glory of the Incarnation. The eternal Son of God in all His glory is hidden beneath His humble humanity. If you bumped into Jesus on the street, you would not have seen anything unusual about Him. He would blend into a crowd. Yet the fullness of deity dwells bodily in Jesus. The finite contains the Infinite. The Creator comes as the creature. But for this brief moment on the mountain, three disciples are privileged to catch a glimpse of Jesus' shining glory. Not the full blast! That would blind and destroy any of us. No one can bear that sight in this flesh. But it was enough of a glimpse to let them know that there was more to Jesus than met their eye.

Jesus was preparing the disciples for the road ahead. The next mountain would be Calvary, and it would be anything but glorious. Instead of light, there would be darkness. Instead of life,

there would be death. Instead of glory, there would be defeat. Instead of a voice from heaven, there would be silence. Only John would be there to watch. Peter would deny Jesus three times and go into hiding. We don't know what happened with James. Immediately after coming down from the glory of this mountain, Jesus began to teach that He must suffer, die and rise again. The glory of the transfiguration pointed to the glory of the cross, the hidden glory of Christ's victory over Sin by becoming Sin, his conquering Death by dying, His fulfilling the Law by being cursed by the Law.

What about Moses and Elijah? What were they doing there? All Matthew's gospel says is they were talking with Jesus. Luke adds that they were discussing His "departure," the word there is "exodus," meaning His death and resurrection. Jesus came to fulfill Torah and the Prophets. And now Moses and Elijah stand as witnesses to Jesus in His glory. They pointed the way in the Old Testament, and now they bear witness to the glory they longed to see.

It's also a little glimpse of the resurrection. Moses and Elijah were long dead. They died centuries before. And yet here they are alive in the presence of Jesus. He's the Lord of the living and all are alive to Him. This is a little sneak preview of the glory of the resurrection when Christ will appear to raise the dead and give His believers eternal life. Moses and Elijah are part of that.

Peter wanted to preserve the moment. Enshrine it with three tents or tabernacles. It seems we always want to do that. Preserve the vision. Make a shrine to it. Pilgrims would flock to it. In truth, we don't even know where this happened. There are some guesses but little in the way of hard evidence. The point is, you can't enshrine a vision like this. Faith isn't made or sustained by these sorts of things, which is why only three disciples even saw it. It's why the cloud descended on the mountain so there was nothing more to see. It's why the voice of the Father spoke as He did at Jesus' Baptism and said, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him." And when the cloud lifted, they saw only Jesus.

Shining Jesus is wonderful, glorious, amazing, awesome. But that's not the way Jesus saves you. He doesn't save you with displays of power and glory. He saves you by becoming your sin and dying on a cross. Our old Adam, our sinful nature, loves the glory. He's a glory junkie who seeks a shining Jesus, a glorious Jesus, a power Jesus. And the reason for that is so that we can feel good about ourselves. We can prop ourselves up over and against our brothers and sisters. We can feel special and privileged. "Lord, it's good that we are here!" Never mind the others, we're here. That's what's important. It's so good to be here and bask in the glory. Let's enshrine

our moment so that others can take in the afterglow. A lot of religion is built on precisely that. Enshrined afterglow.

But the faith that saves and justifies before God is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

When the cloud lifted, they saw no one except Jesus only. Moses and Elijah were gone. They cannot save you. The commandments and the prophecies cannot save you. They can only point you to Jesus and deliver you dead at His feet. Only Jesus can bear your Sin. Only Jesus can conquer your Death. Only Jesus can justify you before the Father. Listen to Him and to Him alone. He alone has the words of eternal life. He alone has a Baptism that saves you. He alone has a Body and Blood that bring you forgiveness, life, and salvation. He alone can raise you from the dead on the last day. Moses and Elijah needed Christ to live. They trusted in Christ. They bore witness to Christ. And together with the Father's voice they are saying to you, "This is the beloved Son of God, hear Him!"

Peter also points us not to visions of shining Jesus but to the Word as a light shining in the darkness. That's noteworthy. Peter saw this great vision of Jesus on His mountain and he reminds us that we have something better, the prophetic Word made sure. We have the fulfillment of Moses and the prophets. We have Christ the Word enfleshed in Word and sacraments, ingloriously here for us, hidden beneath water, words, bread and wine. There is much more to Jesus than meets the eye, and the more is in the hearing. The ears receive much more Jesus than the eyes can perceive. Don't try to look at Him. Hear Him. Faith comes by hearing. Hearing is where the faith-action is.

With the hearing comes our own transfiguration too. The Scripture says we too are being transfigured, changed "from glory to glory" by the Spirit, being renewed by the transforming of our minds in Christ Jesus. Just as the divinity of Jesus was hidden beneath the weakness of His humanity, so the new man in Christ, our new nature, is hidden under the weakness of the old man in Adam. Our "mount of transfiguration" comes on the Last Day, and not one day sooner, when the Lord will raise us and we will appear in bodies as glorious as His, perfectly reflecting the light of His glory without the stain of Sin.

For now, there are only glimpses of that glory as we let our light so shine before men that they would see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. To be sure, that light is always attenuated by Sin. Our good works are never entirely good in themselves, since a

sinner is doing them. But they are still good with God's goodness. We no longer live, but Christ who is in us lives. And the Christ who is in us is transforming us, "morphing us" into His image, daily in the life of repentance, of baptismally dying and rising, we are being transformed from the inside out, as the old you dies and the new you in Christ rises.

And so on this mountain of transfiguration, witnessed by Peter, James, and John, we get a three-fold glimpse of glory: The glory of Jesus' divinity shining through His humanity as the Incarnate Son. The glory of the resurrection in which Moses and Elijah together with all the saints of all time will be gathered together with Christ on the Last Day. And the mystery of our own transformation from glory to glory, as day by day we die to Sin and live to Righteousness in Christ. Your future is glorious, dear baptized believer. As glorious as Jesus shining on the mountain.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Matthew 17:1-9 / 2 March 2014 (Transfiguration A)", posted 2014-03-02 (<https://htlcms.org/2014/03/mt-171-9-2-march-2014-transfiguration-a/>).