

Transfiguration: Shine, Jesus, Shine!

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Matthew 17:1-9

“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.” Jesus told this plainly to His disciples on the heels of Peter’s great confession – “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” From that point on, Jesus began to speak openly of His death and resurrection, that He would be betrayed, handed over to sinful men to be crucified, and on the third day raised to life again.

Peter, who had confessed Jesus to be the Christ, didn’t want that kind of Christ, and so He tried to dissuade Jesus, send Him on a detour away from the cross. “This must never happen to you.” But those were Satan’s words not God’s. Satan would delight to have an uncrucified Jesus, because Satan knew the threat, that Jesus cross-bruised heel would crush the head of the serpent and be the devil’s undoing. Anything but a crucified Jesus.

And then Jesus tells His disciples that some of them would not taste death, they would not die, until they saw Jesus, the Son of Man, in the glory of His kingdom. And then He let a week go by. I wonder what they talked about that week. Who would it be? Who would not taste death before he saw Jesus in His glory? And what did that mean?

Six days later, Jesus selects three of His twelve – Peter, James and John – to go with Him up on a high mountain alone. These are the ones who would not taste death before they saw Jesus in the glory of His kingdom. Not the others. They would have to wait. Just these three. Unfair? Of course! Jesus is not fair, but merciful and gracious. It took two or three eyewitnesses to establish a fact. These three were enough.

While they were with Jesus, suddenly He was changed in appearance. Metamorphosized. Transfigured. His face shone like the sun; His clothes gleamed white as light. We say it in the Creed: God of God, Light of Light. True God of true God. Peter, James and John saw it with their own eyes. Jesus’ humanity joined with His divinity. True God and true Man all in the same Person shining with the glory of God.

The glory concealed is now revealed. The glory that once filled tabernacle and temple, the glory that departed from Israel is now seen in Jesus. God with us. Immanuel. This isn't about how man becomes God, but how God becomes Man yet still retains the fulness of His glory. Nothing compromised. Full blast God in human flesh. And the sight is glorious.

With Jesus were Moses and Elijah from the Old Testament. Moses, through whom came the Torah. Elijah, the chief of the prophets. Mr. Torah and Mr. Prophecy, standing with shining Jesus and talking with Him the way one converses with an old friend. It's a picture of the resurrection, when we too will stand in the glory of Jesus, raised from our death. This is a little sneak preview of what lies ahead for the disciples and for you, baptized believer.

Jesus came not to abolish Moses and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. To bring them to their conclusion and purpose. And here they are flanking Jesus, bearing witness to Him. Luke says they were discussing Jesus' "exodus," His departure, that is, His coming death and resurrection by which Moses and the prophets are fulfilled.

So you read about this and you think, "Wow! I wish I'd been there." Wouldn't that sight have been something? Moses wanted to see God's glory but instead was hidden in a cave as the glory of God passed by. Elijah wanted to see God's glory but was hidden in the same cave as an earthquake and wind and fire came before God revealed Himself in a whisper. They could not see God's glory. A sinner may not look on God and live. He'd be toast. But glorious Jesus, that's different. You can look at Him. It's OK. With Jesus, you can see and live to tell about it.

Still, there's something about shining Jesus with Moses and Elijah that's a bit too much to handle. Peter gets this idea to build three shrines, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. He wants to do what religious man always does – enshrine the event. Contain it. Box it up. Domesticate it. There are shrines all over the world, usually shrines to visions of Mary. Lourdes. Guadeloupe. There's an Orthodox monastery built on Mt. Tabor, the purported site of the Transfiguration. Whether it's true or not, Christianity is not about holy sites. Have you ever thought about that? We don't do holy sites. For that matter, we're not even one hundred percent certain where the cross of Jesus was planted.

Why is that? It's because the power of God to save does not reside in places you go to. You don't go to God. God comes to you. You don't need to go on some pilgrimage to some faraway place to draw close to God. God has drawn close to you in Jesus, who manifests Himself for you personally in the water of your Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Supper, in the

spoken Word of forgiveness, the gathering of even as few as two or three gathered in His name. That's your mountain. That's the place where Jesus meets you.

Peter, one of the honored three who saw Jesus glorified wrote this: For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 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," 18 we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts..." (2 Peter 1)

Peter, who saw this vision with his own eyes and testified to it, points us to the Word, as something "more sure" than this great vision. More sure. It is more sure to hear the word of forgiveness spoken by your pastor than to see shining Jesus on a mountaintop. It is more sure to remember your Baptism than to see Moses and Elijah standing next to Jesus in His glory. It is more sure to eat His Body as bread and drink His blood as wine than to see His face shining like the sun and His clothes brighter than anything on earth. It is more sure to read of Christ in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures than to stand on the mountain where this happened.

Before Peter could begin his shrine building, a thick cloud covered the mountain. It was the same cloud that covered Sinai and filled the tabernacle and temple. The pillar of cloud that guided Israel. And from the cloud there came the voice of the Father, echoing Jesus' baptism. "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him."

Hear His words. His are the words of eternal life. Moses can't save you, but he can point you to the One who can. Elijah can't save you, but he can point you to the One who can. Only Jesus can save you. Only Jesus bears your sin, your death, the punishments of the Law. Only Jesus can mediate between God and Man because He is both God and Man. Moses and Elijah reflected the glory of God, but only Jesus shines with the glory of God. Moses and Elijah were like the moon reflecting the sun. But only Jesus shines like the sun with His own light. Moses and Elijah reflected the light; only Jesus is the Light of the world.

And in the end that's what the three disciples saw. Only Jesus. He came and picked them up off the ground, raised them up out of their fear. They saw no one but Jesus only. He's all they need. He's all you need too.

And then a curious thing. As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone about this vision until He had been raised from the dead. Not even the other nine disciples. Don't tell anyone. How do you not tell everyone when you've seen something like that? But shining Jesus without crucified Jesus leaves all the wrong impressions. Try this. Which would you rather have witnessed? Jesus' transfiguration or Jesus' crucifixion? Which would you want to see with your own eyes – shining Jesus or dead Jesus? I don't think I need to take a poll. Shining Jesus wins hands down, doesn't He?

We prefer the glory to the cross, not only with Jesus but also in our own lives. We prefer the stories of miraculous healings to the stories of heroic suffering. We prefer the power and the majesty of a Jesus who shines with unearthly glory than a beaten and bloodied Jesus who hangs dead and defeated. But here's the rub: Only dead Jesus can save you. Only crucified Jesus can bear your sin. If all that Jesus ever did was appear shining and radiant on a mountain to three of His disciples, you'd still be stewing in your Sin and Death. You'd still be condemned by the Law.

In Islam, it is said that the moon came out of the sky and went up one sleeve of Mohammed and out the other. But no one saw it. And for this reason, we are to believe the words of Mohammed as true and inspired by God. Jesus appeared transfigured along with Moses and Elijah before three eyewitnesses, and yet we don't believe Him on account of that alone. We believe Him on account of His death and His resurrection.

The Transfiguration tells you who Jesus is – true God and true Man. Divinity in human flesh. It tells you that even though His divinity may be buried deeply in His humanity, nevertheless the fulness of deity dwells bodily in Jesus without attenuation. He is fully God and fully Man. But His death and resurrection tell you who He is for you – your Lord, your Redeemer, your Savior, God's sacrificial Lamb who dies for the sin of the world.

You will see shining Jesus one day, soon enough. He's promised to appear again in glory and to raise you from the dead and give you eternal life. You will see Moses and Elijah and all the saints. And there won't be any need to build a shrine to preserve the moment, because the moment will be an eternity. And the sight will be glorious, no doubt about that.

But for now, the mountain of glory gives way to the mountain of the cross. And shining Jesus gives way to crucified Jesus. And the Sunday of Transfiguration gives way to Ash Wednesday

and the somber season of Lent. But it's always the same Jesus – shining, dead, risen, reigning.
It's always the same Jesus – true God and Man – who comes to save you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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