

THE MAJESTIC GLORY

Matthew 17:1-8 The Transfiguration

17 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

MESSAGE:

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the day we reflect on Jesus’ revelation of His divinity to his disciples. The transfiguration of Jesus Christ is the great unifying event of the Bible. When Jesus took three of his disciples up on a mountain and revealed his divinity to them, showing them that he was God as well as man, several major themes of the Bible come together as one. As a result, Matthew’s account of the transfiguration is a theological treasure that contains many riches, some of which we will try to bring out today. This will be an expository sermon, so I invite you to follow along in your bulletins.

“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.”

Wow! A lot to happen in three short verses! First of all, to be “transfigured” means to be changed in form. The Greek word is μεταμορφοομαι, from which we get the word *metamorphosis*, which means “to change from one form into another.” When a caterpillar changes into a butterfly, it goes through metamorphosis. Jesus changed his physical form in front of his disciples in order to reveal the divine being that lay behind the itinerant carpenter and preacher they had been traveling with for two years. He didn’t show them his full divinity, of course, because they could not have survived the experience. In his sinful flesh, man cannot look directly upon the face of God and live; he would be instantly vaporized. But he showed them enough of it to get the point across: the brilliant white light they saw was a clear indication that God was present, as had been attested by prophets throughout the Old Testament. For example the prophet Daniel once saw God in a vision and described him as “*having clothing as white as snow, hair as white as wool, and a face like lightning.*” To the Israelites at Mt. Sinai God appeared as “a consuming fire on top of the mountain.” Even the reflection of this consuming fire from the face of Moses was so bright that he had to cover his face with a veil in order to avoid blinding the Israelites. This, then, was God-light which shone forth from Jesus on the mountain top, making it clear to Peter and James and John that in the flesh and blood of a Palestinian

peasant, they were beholding the face of God Himself: Yahweh Elohim, the living God of Israel and the God of all creation.

As if this weren't enough, two other familiar figures appear with Jesus: Moses, the great Lawgiver and Elijah, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah represent the two main dispensations of the Old Covenant: the Law and the Promise. The Law prescribed exactly what the Israelites had to do—and not do—in order to live in harmony with God, and the Promise was God's pledge that He would send a Messiah, a Savior who would fulfill that law. And between the Lawgiver and the Prophet stands Jesus, who came to fulfill both the Law and the Promise: the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of mankind. Matthew simply records that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus, but in Luke's account of the transfiguration, he tells us what they were talking about: they were discussing his departure, his *ἔξοδος*, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem. Like Moses before him, Jesus would lead mankind out of slavery into freedom from sin, by mounting a cross, dying to this world, being resurrected from the dead, and ascending into heaven.

The three disciples were stunned by what was taking place in front of their eyes. Nevertheless, they had a certain degree of understanding of what was going on: *“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’”* The word that is translated as “shelter” is the κοινή Greek word σκηνασ, which referred to the tent of meeting or tabernacle where God came to dwell with the Israelites when they gathered together to worship him during their wanderings in the desert. Later on, Solomon built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem where all Israel came to worship God. And so Peter's response to the mysterious events unfolding before him was to suggest that the three disciples prepare for worship by building booths or tabernacles for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. In one way it was an appropriate response: when one finds himself in the presence of God, he has no alternative but to worship Him. But it also reveals a major flaw in Peter's thinking—and the thinking of the rest of Jesus' Jewish disciples: they were trying to force-fit Jesus into their traditional mode of thinking by understanding him in terms of the Old Covenant. In Jesus' words, they were trying to pour new wine into old wineskins which couldn't possibly contain it. They were thinking of Jesus as a prophet and perhaps the Messiah. They didn't realize that he was much, much more than both. By offering to enshrine Moses and Elijah in tents of worship along with Jesus, they were considering the three of them to be roughly equal. Jesus might well be the Messiah, the ultimate prophet of whom Moses and the rest of the prophets had spoken, but no more. There on the mountain, he was one of three: Elijah, Moses, Jesus.

And then the unthinkable happened: the glory of Almighty God, Yahweh Sabbaoth, descended upon the mountain in a cloud, just as it had at Mount Sinai, and enfolded them all. Lawgiver, prophet, Messiah and disciples—all were covered by the glory of God! Then the voice of God came out of the cloud, saying: *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. LISTEN TO HIM!”* Prophet—to be sure. King, yes, a king indeed. Messiah—oh yes, Jesus was surely the long promised Messiah. But He was much, much more than all of these: JESUS WAS GOD HIMSELF!

My friends, nowhere in the Bible is it made any clearer that God's salvation came to us through His Son and through his Son alone. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life.

LISTEN TO HIM! Nobody comes to the Father except through Jesus. LISTEN TO HIM! For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. LISTEN TO HIM!

At this point, Peter and James and John did the only thing they could do: they fell facedown on the ground, terrified. What other reaction can sinful man have when he finds himself in the presence of a Holy God whom he has enraged with his sins? Peter and James and John felt the same terror the Israelites felt when they beheld God descending on Mount Sinai in lightning and thunder. They were scared to death.

What God was saying was unmistakable—and incomprehensible: *“This is my Son!”* They had looked at Jesus through sin-blinded eyes for two years and seen only an itinerant preacher who said strange things and pulled off an occasional miracle. They had become comfortable with the idea of Jesus as a role-model and a rabbi, a teacher of God’s word. But—the Son of GOD? GOD HIMSELF?

Then came the greatest miracle of all: *“...Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’”* The One who was God Himself, Who by all cosmic justice could have and should have struck them down where they lay and consigned them to hell, walks over to them and touches them gently and speaks the life-giving words: *“Rise up—don’t be afraid!”* God had commanded them to listen to Jesus, and his first words are: *“Rise up—don’t be afraid!”*

Rise up, all you who are weary and heavy-laden with sin! Rise up all you who are struggling with pain and sickness! Rise up all you who are filled with anxiety and fear of what the future holds for you! Rise up and look into the face of God without fear: it is the face of His Son who has come to fulfill all your hopes and meet all your needs. It is the face of Jesus Christ, the face of God’s love which tames all of his wrath over your sins and sets you free.

And then, the final words: *“When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.”* Gone is Moses. Gone is Elijah. Gone is the shekinah, the cloud of God’s glory. There is no one except Jesus. All of the old covenant is fulfilled in Jesus—the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

And so it is. The Law no longer has anything to do with all of us who have lifted up our eyes and seen Jesus; we are no longer under the rule of Law; we dwell in the kingdom of grace and forgiveness. The Promise is fulfilled for all us who have lifted up our eyes and seen Jesus. Moses and Elijah have come and gone and the New Age has dawned—the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived! The glory of God is no longer hidden in a cloud: it has assumed a clear and present form: it is the face of Jesus Christ!

Lifting up their eyes they saw no one except Jesus!

May we all be so blessed!

Amen.