

“A GLIMPSE OF GLORY”

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord (Series A)

February 26, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Transfiguration of Our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 17, verses 1 through 9. It is on page 694 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus shines, literally. We call it “The Transfiguration.” And we get a very clear description of who, exactly, Jesus is. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 17, we begin reading at verse 1.

^{17:1} 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.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “**Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.**”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Who is Jesus? For about two thousand years now, this has been one of the most crucial questions in—not just the Church—but also in the world. Who is Jesus?

I couldn’t even try to count the number of different answers the world has to that question.

Six days before the transfiguration Jesus posed this question to his disciples. He asked, “**Who do people say that the Son of Man is?**” (16:13)

They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (16:14).

These, apparently, were some of the opinions out there. But Jesus was really more concerned with what the people right in front of him believed. So he made the question a bit more personal. He asked, “**But who do you say that I am?**” (16:15)

Peter spoke up on behalf of the Twelve and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). This was the correct answer. Now Peter has a reputation for saying some things without really thinking. But this was a wise and correct answer.

So Jesus commends Peter, saying, “**Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah!**” (That’s Peter’s other name.) “**For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.**” (16:17)

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Two thousand years later, we are still debating the same question. Who is Jesus? Some say a prophet. Others say a miracle worker. Still others say he was a great teacher or a revolutionary. An inspiration—whatever that means. Some would even say he is merely a legend, even though the weight of historical evidence is strongly against them.

But, even more important than everyone else’s answer, is your answer. Who do *you* say Jesus is? It’s not merely an academic question. Being able to catalog all the different opinions doesn’t really matter if you don’t actually have an answer. Who is Jesus? When it comes to your own salvation, everyone else’s answer doesn’t matter. Your answer does.

Just as Jesus posed this question to the disciples, so we also must answer. Jesus asks, “**But who do you say that I am?**” Your answer matters.

But, lest we be accused of narcissism, we also realize that our own personal answers are not the most important. Whether or not you believe Jesus to be the Son of God, doesn’t make it true or false. He is who he is, whether you believe it or not.

Our own personal answers are important, but they do not determine truth. For that we must look to someone with authority.

So there is one other person who gets to weigh in on the matter today, and his answer settles it.

Six days after Peter confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he heard someone more important confess the same thing. He heard a voice from a bright cloud say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (17:5).

There’s your authoritative answer. When God himself speaks from heaven, that settles every debate. There is no longer any room for opinions.

And this is what we heard Peter say in the epistle lesson this morning.

“We did not follow cleverly devised myths ..., but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when ... 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 1:16-18)

Peter didn’t believe just because he wanted it to be true. He didn’t believe because Christianity “just felt right.” He didn’t believe because it “worked for him.” He believed because he saw it, and he heard the voice from heaven. And it wasn’t just the transfiguration. He was an eyewitness to many signs and wonders—miracles of healing, feeding people, walking on water, raising people from the dead, even Jesus’ own resurrection. Peter, and several others, were eyewitnesses to the historical events.

And that, by the way, is the unique thing about Christianity: it’s all based on historical events. With other world religions, it’s based on some private revelation from God, or some golden tablets delivered by an angel that were conveniently lost, or maybe just some feeling you get while meditating. With other religions it’s just a set of doctrines that are supposedly handed down by God or discovered by some mystic. And no one can verify whether it’s true or not. But with Christianity, all the doctrine is based on historical events with eyewitnesses. Sometimes there are even dozens or hundreds of eyewitnesses.

This is why we can echo Peter’s words, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths.”

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Now, obviously, you and I are not eyewitnesses. But our faith is still not based on our own subjective feelings. Nor is it based on the testimony of one supposed eyewitness. Instead, it is based on all the eyewitnesses and the historical documentation of their testimony.

Christianity, unlike any other in the world, is a historical religion. The only thing remotely like it in this respect is Judaism, with whom we share the history of the Old Testament. The gospels, especially, read like historical documents with names, places, dates, and events. That is because they are historical documents. They preserve for us the eyewitness testimony of Peter, James, John, and dozens of other people.

So when we read about the transfiguration of Jesus, we’re not reading a legend. We are reading the testimony of the eyewitnesses.

So let’s talk about this historical event. What exactly is a transfiguration? I don’t think I’ve ever heard this word, other than in this story about Jesus. The Greek word might actually sound more familiar, that is, if you paid attention in your high school science class. It’s μεταμορφόομαι (*metamorphomai*). It kind of sounds like *metamorphosis*, because it kind of is. To transfigure means to change in form or appearance into something more glorious or exalted.

For this brief moment in time, Jesus let at least part of his divine glory shine through his human nature. And it was glorious.

Three of the disciples—Peter, James, and John—got to witness it. Jesus basically became a bright light. It says, “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (17:2).

Now think about these descriptions. What’s brighter than the sun? There’s a reason your parents tell you to not look at it. It is dangerously bright. Our eyes are not designed to handle it. Jesus’ face was so bright, that the sun was the only thing comparable to it. That’s bright.

And then his clothes became white as light. Now, light isn’t usually our go-to comparison for something extraordinarily white. If something is really, really white, we might say it is as white as freshly fallen snow. That’s about the whitest thing we can imagine. But white as light—that’s a whole ‘nother level of white. Whenever you get blinded by a light—like when an oncoming car doesn’t dim their high beams—all you see is the color white. There might not be anything white around you, but when light fills up all the space, all you see is white. That’s the description of Jesus’ clothes. We’re talking dangerously white. There’s a reason Jesus didn’t walk around like this all the time. It would just be too bright. Nobody would be able to tolerate his presence.

Mark, in his account of the transfiguration, says that “his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). If the transfiguration happened today, Clorox would try to sign Jesus to an endorsement.

So Jesus’ appearance was changed, and when the disciples looked, they also saw Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. Now this is certainly strange. Moses and Elijah are significant Bible characters, but this is the wrong time for them. It’s off by about 900 years for Elijah and 1,400 for Moses. Yet here they are, a blast from the past, talking with a shining Jesus.

Peter sees this glorious sight, and he wants to make it permanent. This is the sort of thing Peter wants to see more of from Jesus. In fact, six days earlier, Peter and Jesus had an argument about this very thing.

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We mentioned Peter’s great confession of faith, where he confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” That was six days before the transfiguration.

Well, right after Peter’s confession of faith, Jesus started teaching his disciples about the necessity of the cross—both in his life and in theirs. He began teaching his disciples “that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (16:22). This, of course, was the whole reason the Son of God took on human flesh. In the Church we’re kind of familiar with this idea. But this was new territory for Peter and the other disciples. And they didn’t really like the idea.

So here’s what Peter does: he pulls Jesus aside privately and rebukes him (16:22). Imagine this! Peter has just confessed this guy to be the Christ—that is, the Messiah—and the Son of God himself. But as soon as Jesus says something Peter disagrees with, he rebukes him! Now that’s bold.

But Jesus is insistent. He must go to the cross. In fact, he even insists on the cross as a reality in his disciples’ lives as well. He goes on to say, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24).

Now we see two totally different mindsets between Jesus and Peter. Peter wants to follow “The Glory Road.” And that’s the road he wants Jesus to take too. On “The Glory Road,” there is no suffering, no cross, no pain. It’s just happy fun time all the time. It sounds nice. This is the kind of journey that appeals to us as well.

But Jesus insists on a different road: “The Road to the Cross.” This road definitely involves suffering, pain, and even death. The last word we would think of to describe this road is *glory*.

But Jesus insists on this road. Now, he could actually choose “The Glory Road” if he wanted to. Jesus has his choice. But, if he takes “The Glory Road,” no one can go with him, because no one else is worthy. That’s why Jesus insists on “The Road to the Cross.” But the disciples, Peter especially, don’t understand.

So fast forward again six days to the transfiguration. Peter sees this glorious sight of a shining Jesus hanging out with a couple of real-life Bible heroes. And he’s thinking, *Yeah! This is what I’m talking about! Jesus, you’re finally coming around to my way of thinking.* So Peter, apparently, wants to preserve this glory moment. He says, “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.” (17:4)

Now, there are at least three problems with what Peter says. First, he seems to actually interrupt this conversation between Moses, Elijah, and a shining Jesus. That’s bold. Second, his offer to build three tents, puts these three men on equal footing. All three of them are pretty awesome, but the shiny one is way more awesome. And third, Peter wants to make this glory moment last longer than God intends. That’s what the tents are for. He still doesn’t accept the necessity of the cross.

So Peter interrupts Moses, Elijah, and a shining Jesus with his bad idea. But then someone else interrupts Peter. “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’ ” (17:5).

We’ve heard some of these words before. At Jesus’ Baptism, almost the exact same thing happens. After Jesus came up out of the river, “A voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’ ” (3:17).

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And now, at the transfiguration, we hear the exact same words, but with something added at the end: the words, “Listen to him.”

And we remember this disagreement between Peter and Jesus. God the Father actually steps in to settle it.

This Jesus is the Son of God. Listen to him.

You’ve seen a glimpse of the glory. And the glory is real. You’re going to see it again. You’re not wrong for wanting to see it, because it’s a good thing. But if Jesus says he has to go to the cross, then he has to go to the cross. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” And if he says that your life, also, will be marked by the cross, then your life, also, will be marked by the cross. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

These added words—“Listen to him”—they’re not just for Peter or the other two disciples on the mountain. These words are for you and me too. Peter’s not the only person who prefers glory. If you and I had to choose between a shining Jesus and the Jesus who’s hanging naked, beaten, bloodied, humiliated, and dead on a Roman cross, I think we’d probably take the shiny one. And if we had to pick between one of these two as the pattern for our own lives, we sure wouldn’t pick the bloody dead guy.

However, the choice isn’t up to us. It’s up to Jesus. And it’s a good thing the choice isn’t ours. Because if you pick the shiny Jesus, you end up getting neither. But if you pick the bloody dead guy, you get both, because it’s the same guy. He’s just got to get bloody first.

And so it’s a good thing the choice isn’t ours. It’s Jesus’ choice. And he chose the cross.

Now, glory isn’t bad. And Peter wasn’t wrong for wanting Jesus to be glorious. Jesus is glorious, and that’s a very good thing. But Jesus didn’t want to keep his glory to himself. He wants to share it with you. And the only way to share it with you is for him to go to the cross. His glory can only come to us through the cross. He must suffer and die for the sins of the world. He must be buried in a tomb. And he must be raised from the dead. Because without his atonement for your sin, you can’t handle his glory. Even a veiled glimpse would be too much. But if he has done his work to cleanse us from sin, and if we have been baptized into that work, then not only will we see him when he appears in glory, but we will also appear *with* him in glory (Col. 3:4).

Glory is coming. It just has to go through the cross.

And what does God the Father say of all this? “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Amen.

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14). Amen.