

GLORY AND THE CROSS

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Our Lord (Series A)

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 17, verses 1 through 9. In this gospel lesson, we get a brief glimpse of Jesus' true glory. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 17, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus might not be what you want him to be. This is something we all need to consider. I mean, what if our ideas of Jesus are based more on what we want him to be instead of who he actually is. That would be a big problem, because the only Jesus who is of any real value is the real Jesus. But the real Jesus might not be what we want him to be.

In fact, if we are following our natural, sinful desires, and there's a decent chance at any moment that we are, the Jesus we want is certainly not the same Jesus as the real Jesus.

Some of our recent epistle readings from 1 Corinthians have emphasized this. For example, 1 Corinthians 1:18 says, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." And 2:14 says, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Unless our desires have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, who we want Jesus to be or who we think Jesus is will never correspond to who Jesus really is.

I bring this up because, since there is such a disparity between who Jesus really is and who our sinful nature wants Jesus to be, we should often examine ourselves, and we should often examine our views about Jesus. Do they correspond to the Jesus we find in the Gospels? Furthermore, are the Scriptures the source of our ideas about Jesus, or do they come from somewhere else?

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There are many false views of Jesus. For example, in the prosperity gospel, Jesus is a somewhat reluctant giver of treasure. I say “somewhat reluctant” because, in this view, Jesus wants to give you happiness and wealth in this life, but you have to ask the right way in order to get it out of him. In this theology, the purpose of Jesus is to give us heaven on earth, and right now. But this is a false Jesus.

There’s also the relational Jesus. This is the Jesus who’s just a really nice guy. He’s down to earth, he’s your friend, and he just really understands what you’re going through. I want to talk about this one a little bit, because you’ve probably seen this one lately, and you’ll probably see more of it. This is the Jesus of the “He Gets Us” campaign. You might have seen some of their commercials. They aired a couple during the Super Bowl. I guess some people noticed that Jesus has an image problem these days. And maybe that’s true. So they launched a hundred-million-dollar public relations campaign. They’re emphasizing the relatability of Jesus. As with many things, some of it is good, and some of it is bad. The basic idea is that, whatever you’re going through, Jesus understands. He gets it. And some of what they’re saying is good. For example, they had a commercial to teach that, “Jesus loved the people we hate.” This one got heavy criticism from people on both the left and the right, which really just shows that people want to feel justified in hating the other side. So I actually thought this one was really good. Jesus loves the people we hate. Yeah. Really. We have no idea how true that is.

But they had a rather confusing one about children doing really nice things for each other. And then it said, “Jesus didn’t want us to act like adults.” I’m not sure, but I think it’s a twist on Jesus saying that we must become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3, 6; 19:14; Mark 9:42; 10:14). What Jesus means by that is that we should trust him and be dependent on him the way children trust and depend on their parents. But he doesn’t mean that we should act like children. Now sometimes children do some really cute and compassionate things, like they did in the commercial. But they also bite each other and steal one another’s toys. Instead of becoming more childish, we should actually become more adult-like, and I mean adult-like in the way adults are supposed to be.

And there’s a sign that just says, “Jesus was fed up with politics, too.” I thought, *Where do we see that in the Bible?* Jesus honored the governing authorities, he paid his taxes, and he taught us to do the same. In fact, Scripture teaches that Jesus is the supreme king over every political authority (Rom. 13:1; 1 Cor. 15:27). If he’s fed up with his underlings, he can just get rid of them.

Now there’s some good in the campaign. It would be wrong to say that it’s all bad. But we should find it troubling when they say that their goal is to reintroduce people to the “historical Jesus,” but there are big pieces of the historical Jesus that they don’t say anything about. They emphasize his relatability. That is, that Jesus gets you. He understands you. And this is true (Heb. 4:15). He understands us far better than we understand ourselves. But it also means that he knows everything about us, even the things we try to hide (Heb. 4:13). And this might actually make us tremble. So they emphasize the human and relational side of Jesus, but I haven’t seen anything about Jesus being God. I guess that’s not very relatable. So there isn’t anything about Jesus casting out demons, healing the sick, raising the dead. And there isn’t anything more than a vague reference to his crucifixion. And there’s nothing about his resurrection. But these are the things we find on every page of the gospels. If you want to teach the real Jesus, you need those things.

There's more that could be said, but if you want to learn more, I would recommend doing a web search for the name "Natasha Crain." She's a Christian author, and she's written the best thing I've seen about the "He Gets Us" campaign.

By way of false Jesuses, there is also the political Jesus, or really, the two political Jesuses, one Republican and one Democrat. And these false Jesuses were created to support political agendas and pull Christians to one side or the other. Both sides have a little bit right, and a lot wrong. If you feel drawn to one of the political Jesuses, it probably reveals that your religion is politics, your god is a president, past, present, or potential, and your heaven is just a slightly better United States.

This false Jesus actually seems to have quite a bit in common with Peter's false Jesus. And yes; even Peter had a false view of Jesus, even though the real Jesus was right in front of him, and he walked around Israel with the real Jesus, and he talked with the real Jesus, and he saw just about every miracle the real Jesus ever performed. This shows us how remarkably easy it is to have a false Jesus. Peter, at this point in time, had some things right about Jesus and some things wrong.

The account of Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew 17 is very much connected with the conversation Jesus and Peter had in chapter 16. If you have a Bible handy, you can look back to chapter 16, verse 13 and following. Jesus had a conversation with his disciples about who, exactly, he is. He started by asking them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (16:13). "Son of Man" is a title that Jesus often used to refer to himself. They answered, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (16:14). But at this moment, Jesus was really more concerned about what they thought, so he asks a more direct question, "But who do you say that I am?" (16:15). Peter spoke up, and his answer probably reflects the conviction of the whole group, but we at least know this was Peter's conviction. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Now sometimes Peter said the right thing, and sometimes he said the wrong thing. Here he says the absolute best thing. His answer is spot-on, and Jesus commends him for it. It seems, at this point, that Peter has the right view of Jesus. He is the Christ and the Son of God.

But Peter's conviction is quickly shaken when Jesus starts to reveal more about himself. After nailing down his identity, Jesus goes to work teaching them what he must do. "From that time Jesus began to show 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" (16:21). That's the first of three specific predictions Jesus makes of his death in the Gospel of Matthew (see also 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Now for us, it might not seem that strange or out of place for Jesus to predict his death, because we already know about it, and we know what it accomplished. But this is mostly new territory for the disciples. So Peter does something rather bold. And I think this is one of the absolute funniest things in the Bible. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (16:22). Now how many of us would be bold enough to rebuke God face-to-face? He may do plenty of things we disagree with. But standing face-to-face with him, I think we would keep it to ourselves. But Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. Remember, this is just moments after Peter confessed him to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God." And it's not as if Peter forgets his confession. He still refers to Jesus as "Lord" while he's rebuking him.

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So what's the deal with Peter? Why would he rebuke Jesus? Well, as Jesus says when he returns the rebuke on Peter, **"You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"** (16:23). Peter was not looking for the Kingdom of God, but he was looking for God to find a place in the kingdom of men. That is, he wanted Jesus to rule on a throne in Jerusalem. Peter had what we might call a "theology of glory." He didn't want a suffering Jesus. He didn't want a dying Jesus. He wanted a glorious Jesus. He had a false Jesus, even though the real Jesus was standing face-to-face with him.

Now Jesus is glorious, far more glorious than we could ever imagine. But the problem Peter had, and this might be the same problem we have if we're looking for this kind of Jesus, is that we want to get a chunk of that glory. We think our big problem is that we just don't have enough happy stuff going on in this world. Maybe we're not rich enough. Maybe the politics of this world is off. So the purpose of Jesus is to reveal his glory in this world and increase our glory.

This error creeps into so many things. Finding pride in our good works is a theology of glory. Wanting a bigger house than your neighbor is a theology of glory. Wanting a bigger congregation is a theology of glory, that is, if we care about the institution more than the actual people. Wanting well-behaved children, an attractive spouse, respect, a good name, a good job, good grades ... it can all be a theology of glory. And most of the time it is a theology of glory. Even if all these things are good, they are harmful if we want all these things for ourselves, but we don't want the suffering. We don't want to have to sacrifice ourselves for someone else. We might be willing to sacrifice ourselves to get something we want. But that's still a theology of glory. We don't want to sacrifice ourselves for someone else, when it will bring us no glory at all. And we don't really want a Savior who has to sacrifice himself, because that means our problem is something worse than just not enough happy stuff. We have a theology of glory. Peter did too. That's why he rebuked Jesus for all this talk about the cross.

All of this sets the background for Jesus' transfiguration. He took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain. There he was transfigured before them. "Transfigure" is kind of a weird word. At most, you probably only hear it once a year, and only if you go to church, because this event is the only transfiguration I've ever heard of. It simply means that Jesus' figure or appearance was transformed. "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (17:2). This is a really interesting description. Usually, if something is really white, we might say it's as white as snow. But nothing is really pure white, except for light. And snow is only white because it reflects the light. So Jesus is looking mighty glorious. And everything I've said so far in this sermon might not make much sense.

Moses and Elijah also appear with Jesus. And Peter must be thinking the same thing. Everything Jesus said about the cross doesn't make much sense now. This, right here, a shiny Jesus on a mountain, this is what it's all about. This is the glory Peter's been waiting for. So he 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" (17:4). Remember how Peter sometimes says the best thing and sometimes the worst thing? Well this is pretty close to the latter. Looking at Jesus, does he really think Jesus needs him to build a tent for him? And he shouldn't interrupt Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah of all people. What's really going on here is that Peter wants to preserve this moment. He wants Jesus to stay on this mountain all shiny and everything. This is the glimpse of glory Peter's been longing for. But it seems that it's also a bit much for him, even terrifying (Mark 9:6), so if he can put Jesus in a tent, then he can have the shiny Jesus, without the brightness overpowering him.

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So Peter gets another rebuke. This time, not from Jesus, but from his Father. “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). If Peter, James, and John weren’t terrified before, they certainly are now (17:6).

Imagine this: you’re just spouting off some nonsense to some folks, but you don’t think it’s nonsense, until a voice comes out of nowhere, and you realize that someone else is present, someone you didn’t know was there, and it’s the voice of God, telling you to shut up. That’s exactly what happens to Peter here.

The words the Father spoke from the cloud are almost identical to the words he spoke at Jesus’ Baptism. At his Baptism, God the Father spoke from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). That’s word-for-word identical to what he says at the transfiguration. But he adds one little piece: “Listen to him.”

Remember that conversation Peter had with Jesus, where he rebuked him for that stuff about the cross? Now Peter wants to preserve shiny Jesus on the mountain. He doesn’t want the cross. But God the Father weighs in on the matter and says, “Listen to him.”

The glory that you want to see in Jesus, it’s all there. The power you want to see in him, it’s all there. It’s all there far more than we could ever know. But we’re not ready for it. We can’t handle it. We need something else from Jesus. We don’t need the shiny Jesus. We don’t need the powerful Jesus. We don’t need the Jesus who can make all of our wildest dreams come true. We don’t need the relatable Jesus who just tells us that we’re okay. Before all of that, we need a dying Jesus. Because, unless Jesus dies for us, then we’re not okay, and everything is not going to be okay, and there’s no glory or power for us. Without a dying Jesus, there is no grace or forgiveness. We might want Jesus to be something else. But Jesus isn’t who we want him to be. He is who we need him to be. And who we need him to be is our crucified and risen Savior.

So Jesus, along with his Father, gives Peter and these other two disciples a little glimpse of his glory before he goes back down the mountain to continue his journey to the cross. It’s this little glimpse so that, as they watch Jesus go to his death, they will know who this is who willingly submits to crucifixion.

And as we are about to enter into the season of Lent, and as we move closer to holy week and the innocent sufferings and death of Jesus, we have his transfiguration to remind us who this is. He has all of this glory. He has all the power in the universe. And he lays it aside ... for you. That’s the Jesus you need. That is your Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.