

"Be A Witness" Matthew 17:1-9 Transfiguration 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, before we look more closely at our Gospel Lesson for this Sunday from Matthew 17, I have a question for you to consider. What did Jesus' transfiguration mean for each of the six people mentioned in Matthew's account of the event? Perhaps let me ask the same question in a slightly different way. For whose benefit was Jesus' transfigured? Let's start with Jesus. Was this occasion a way for God the Father to strengthen his Son for his upcoming suffering and death? Or was Jesus transfigured for the benefit of the other five people that witnessed it. Following up with that thought let's consider what Jesus' "metamorphosis" might have meant for Moses and Elijah. They were already experiencing the glory of heaven. But did they benefit from the conversation with Jesus about his suffering and death? (We know the content of their conversation from Luke's Gospel. Luke tells us that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his upcoming "departure.") I think you can perceive where this line of reasoning leads us. The target audience, if I can call them that, for Jesus' transfiguration seems to have been the three disciples—Peter, James, and John.

Certainly, Jesus' transfiguration would have strengthened Jesus for awaited him in Jerusalem. And, of course, Moses and Elijah, would have enjoyed that special moment with their Savior. But ultimately the disciples were the ones who needed this. And, brothers and sisters,

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they aren't the only disciples that need this special revelation about Jesus. We too need to witness this event. Although we must see it by faith and not by sight, the transfiguration is meant for us. In our sermon this morning let's look more closely at what this one event from the life of Jesus says to each of us.

When we hear of Peter's proposal to preserve the moment by building shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah we can conclude that he really didn't understand what the transfiguration meant. He was distracted by the brilliant revelation of Jesus' glory. In our Gospel for today Matthew tells us, "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." So, what exactly happened to Jesus? That question may be easier to ask than to answer. The divine nature of Jesus was revealed in some miraculous way. He was transformed (the Greek word is metamorphosis). Speaking of the original language of the New Testament of the Bible it tells us that Jesus didn't transfigure himself for his own glory. In the language in which Matthew wrote the verb is passive. Jesus was "transfigured" by his Father. Once again, it may have been a source of encouragement for Jesus. And it may have been a special blessing for Moses and Elijah. But

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it was the disciples that would have most benefitted from Jesus' transfiguration.

As I said a moment ago, the wider context of these verses helps us understand what Jesus' transfiguration meant for the disciples and what it means for us. Matthew told us this happened, "after six days." What happened the week before Jesus was transformed on the mountain? Matthew tells us Jesus had asked his disciples who people thought he was. You may recall their answer. "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." And you may also recall what Jesus asked them as a follow up question. "But what about you?" Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter gave the correct answer. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That confession of who Jesus was and that statement about his true identity would be challenged when the disciples saw what was about to happen to him. He wouldn't look like the Christ when he was wearing a crown of thorns and he was nailed to a cross. When his lifeless body was placed in a tomb it would not appear as though he was the "Son of the living God."

Through the living words of our Gospel, we are allowed to be witnesses of Jesus' transfiguration. Its message for us is simple and similar to the one given to the disciples. It confirms for us the fact that

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Jesus is God and man in one person. But perhaps we are shrugging our shoulders and saying, "Of course we know that Jesus is God. Why do we need a reminder about that?" Because we like to forget. Because the world wants us to forget. We need that reminder.

In addition to confirming Jesus' identity the transfiguration also confirmed his mission. It spoke volumes about why he was born and why he would die. As we said, Peter obviously missed the meaning of what he was witnessing. All he could think about was capturing the moment. He knew it was good to be there on the mountain with Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah. And he wanted to stay there. Mark's account of this event assesses Peter's reaction with the words, "He did not know what to say, they were so frightened." (Mark 9:6) Peter and the two other disciples were so awestruck by what they saw that they seem to have missed what it meant.

As I said before, although Matthew doesn't record the content of the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah, Luke says that they spoke about "his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:31) This wasn't intended to be like a commercial with famous people making a cameo appearance in the background. Talking with Moses and Elijah about his "departure"

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confirmed for the disciples the mission that Jesus was on. The one that he would soon complete.

Moses was the one through whom God had given his law to his people. He brought the “hard copy” of God’s commands to the Israelites and to the world. But as Moses saw among his own people no one could keep the law as a holy God must demand. But Jesus did. He lived a life which was without sin. Soon he would suffer the consequences for all who had broken the commandments—including Moses himself. And remember that Jesus’ transfiguration confirmed he wasn’t an ordinary man keeping the Commandments and dying on the cross. Jesus is God and man in one person. That’s what allowed him to live in our place without sin. And that’s why his death counts for all people. All of these truths can be seen in Jesus’ transfiguration and in the appearance of Moses. It confirmed Jesus’ mission.

The great prophet Elijah being part of the conversation at Jesus’ transfiguration also held meaning for the disciples. It revealed another part of Jesus’ mission. He was there to fulfill all that God had promised through the prophets. From his virgin birth to his horrific death, from his betrayal by a close friend to his burial in a tomb among the well to do, the prophets had outlined how the Messiah would bring God’s

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grace to sinners. Jesus was there to do everything that had been written about him. He would soon complete that mission.

I hope the spectacular details of Jesus' transfiguration haven't hidden its important message from us. It is meant to be comforting for us to see Jesus fulfill the law of God that Moses carried down from Mt. Sinai. He has obeyed his Father's will perfectly in our place. No judgment stands against us for not keeping those Commandments. The perfect fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies is meant to be more than just Bible history. It assures us that Jesus will keep all the other prophecies made about him and those that he himself made. Prophecies that have been kept bring us confidence about promises that have been given. Seeing Moses and Elijah on the mountain at Jesus' transfiguration helps us understand what the whole point of it was. It confirms Jesus' divine mission. Let's not miss the message behind what we see today.

We began our sermon with the goal of answering the question, "What does Christ's transfiguration mean?" We see that it reveals his divine nature and it reveals his divine mission. It also reveals his divine message. That is the last thought we will consider. "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to

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him!" If Peter was babbling in shock over what he saw on the mountain this certainly must have pushed him over the edge. The voice of God himself speaking about his Son was more than the three disciples could take. "When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified."

Two thousand years later we are witnessing Jesus' transfiguration. What is the point of it for us? It still reveals his divine message. We too need to hear the Father say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" The truth is that we can know that Jesus is true God and that he has completed his mission. But if we aren't listening to his Word we can still end up in hell. Romans 1:16 says that the "gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Romans 10:17 describes the importance of Jesus' message, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Colossians 3:16 gives us this reminder, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." Although it might seem impossible to miss the point of Jesus' transfiguration it is very easy to miss what his Father said. We too are to listen to Jesus. His Father's words at his transfiguration confirm his divine message. He wants us to "get the message" of salvation from his Son.

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Some have wondered why Jesus specifically took Peter, James and John up the mountain to witness his transfiguration. The traditional answer for that is that those three were the leaders among the disciples. But there is another explanation. Remember how Peter objected to Jesus' suffering and death? And remember that Jesus called him Satan when he did that? And also think about James and John. They wanted to sit at Jesus' right and left in what they thought would be a visible kingdom on earth. In other words, Peter, James, and John wanted to share in Jesus' glory. But they were defining glory by their standards not by God's definition of glory. Jesus' transfiguration would clarify things for them. Jesus' true glory could be seen in his identity, his mission, and his message not in his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming as white as light. And that is what we witness today! Today we build our faith on what has been revealed to us. With Peter, James, and John we witness Jesus' transfiguration. It confirms Jesus' identity. It confirms Jesus' mission. It confirms Jesus' message! Amen.