

The Transfiguration of our Lord
February 26, 2017
Matthew 17:1-9
“A Glorious Glimpse”

For just a moment, they see it. Peter, James and John see Jesus looking a little bit more like God.

They've been with Him for a while now, disciples following their teacher. They've seen some amazing things. Jesus has healed a man of leprosy, just by touching him and speaking. He's healed the paralyzed servant of a centurion without even being in the same zip code. He's cast out demons, sent a legion of them into a herd of swine. He's calmed a violent storm while at sea, simply by telling the winds and the waves to knock it off. He's made the blind see, the deaf hear, the mute speak. He's done a lot of miracles, worked a lot of wonders. And the whole time He's been doing it, He's looked like...an ordinary man.

So...is He more than that? After all, Moses worked some pretty impressive miracles, both in Egypt and later in the wilderness. He was an ordinary man with God working through him. Elijah would be another one: remember, for instance, his showdown to the death with the prophets of Baal. He was outnumbered 400 to 1; but it didn't matter because the Lord was the One working the wonders there.

The point is that Jesus has been doing some spectacular miracles, but He's not the first. So, who is He? Is He really the Son of the Most High? Or is He just another man through whom God is working?

This is a big question at the start of Matthew 17, because it comes right after Matthew 16. In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” It's Peter who nails it, who says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus praises Peter for his answer and tells them all that this truth has been revealed from heaven. That ought to answer the question of who Jesus is, right? Well, not exactly. For later in Matthew 16, Jesus tells them 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” (Matthew 16:21). And what does the blessed Peter do? He rebukes Jesus for prophesying the cross—for speaking of the Gospel! In Peter's thinking, being crucified for the sins of the world is not the sort of thing that happens to the Son of the living God. In promoting that, he's doing the devil's work.

So, who is this Jesus, anyway? The disciples follow Him, trust Him, love Him, and there's never been anyone quite like Him...but the jury is still out on just who He is.

Just six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on a high mountain by themselves. There, He's transfigured before them. He's not reflecting light. He's radiating it. His face shines like the sun and His clothes become white as light. Jesus, clearly a man, is suddenly shining with radiant glory like...God.

He's not alone, either. Moses and Elijah are there, talking with Him. From Luke, we know that they're talking about Jesus' "exodus," His departure by way of the cross. The two great Old Testament heroes aren't there to give some tips to the young whippersnapper. They are there in service to Him, pointing to Him and His saving work.

It's then that Peter speaks: "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." What is Peter thinking? The Bible doesn't tell us; but it's an odd thing to say. Three tents, one for each equally? It could well be that Peter's still thinking that Jesus is a great man, equal to Moses and Elijah, but nothing more than that.

So, God the Father makes it clear. Peter's still speaking when a bright cloud overshadows them— not a cloud that blocks light, but a cloud that's radiating light. The Father has arrived on the scene, and He makes things perfectly clear: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."

It's interesting that the disciples haven't been afraid up to now; but now they're terrified. They fall on their faces in fright. But Jesus, who touches and speaks to remove disease, now touches and speaks to remove their fear. When they look up, only Jesus is there with them.

How long does this Transfiguration take? The Bible doesn't say exactly, but from the text it doesn't sound like very long. For a very brief moment, Jesus looks like more than man, He looks divine. But that's it: they won't see Him transfigured again—not even when He's risen from the dead or ascending into heaven. Throughout His entire ministry, from birth to ascension, except for this moment He looks ordinary, nothing more than another fragile human. That will never be truer than when He's defeated sin, death and devil as He hangs on the cross.

In fact, perhaps the greatest reason for the Transfiguration—this brief glimpse of glory—is this: so that you know that the One on the cross is, in fact, no less than the Son of God dying for you.

Jesus is fully God and possesses God's glory, but He doesn't display His glory in this fallen world. Not yet, anyway. That's why the Father declares, "Listen to Him." Faith comes by hearing—it's given to you by that life-giving, powerful Word of God. When Jesus returns on the Last Day, then He'll return in glory. In the meantime, don't look for glory. Listen to Him.

People are naturally attracted to glory. However, the glory they want is not the glory of God. People like glory, and they define glory as things that set them apart as better. The athlete is in his glory when he's run the fastest time or caught the winning touchdown. The student achieves his glory when he's at the top of the class or aces the SAT. When people think of glory, they're thinking of things like prosperity, success, fame, power, honor and wealth. The glory that attracts people is the glory that other people get to see and get to covet. Examine yourself: somewhere in that list, there's glory that you crave—even if it's recognition that you're the humblest person around.

When people seek the glory of God, they're usually thinking along the same lines. God has plenty of glory in all sorts of ways: for one, there's that light, that glorious brightness that shines around Him in heaven and sometimes has even been visible on earth, like when He led Israel out of Egypt in that pillar of cloud. Furthermore, all glory, honor, praise, prosperity, power and wealth really belong to God. But remember that when people think of glory, they think of things that set them apart as better. When people seek the glory of God, a lot of the time it means that they want God to manifest Himself in a way that sets them apart from others. Look at the televangelists of our day. They're not preaching about repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Some preach a prosperity Gospel, saying that if you only believe hard enough, then God will give you all sorts of wealth in this world. Some preach a Gospel of immediate healing, saying that if you just believe enough, then God will heal you of all of your diseases right now. If you're prosperous and perfectly healthy, then you're clearly set apart from all those people who aren't, who don't have enough faith to be living such a glorious life.

I'm guessing that most of you aren't fixated on such preachers: if you believe their message, then the proclamation of Christ and Him crucified will be terribly unsatisfying to you. But still, you want similar glory. You'd rather have God work miraculous healing than provide enduring faith throughout a chronic illness. You'd rather have the Lord reward your faith with security and prosperity than have Him strengthen it by teaching you contentment when you have very little. You'd rather have Him use you as an example of success in your vocation than as an example of one who humbly endures setback and trusts anyway.

You want the glory that sets you apart from others.

This means that you want God to set you apart as better off than others, which means you're not loving your neighbor as yourself. For that, you need to repent.

This also means that you're likely to be contemptuous of the glory that Jesus has for you even now, every day. Repent, for this is the far more dangerous sin.

What I mean is this: it is true that all of that glory, honor, prosperity and healing belong to Jesus. That's the sort of stuff you'll see and enjoy in the new creation. When the Lord works such wonders in this world, He's not saying that this is how it ought to be in the here and now. He's giving you a foretaste of what's to come, so that you know in the tiniest way what awaits when you're delivered from this sinful world. Look at the Transfiguration versus the rest of Jesus' ministry: for a fleeting moment, Jesus appears glorious, a hint of how He looks enthroned in heaven. But for the rest of the time, there is nothing in His appearance that sets Him apart. So it is for you as a Christian: where the Lord pours out such glorious blessings on you now, give thanks to Him for these undeserved gifts. But where He doesn't, it does not mean that He is unfaithful.

In the meantime, in this sinful world, Jesus demonstrates His glory in another way. You find a great clue on Palm Sunday, just before Jesus' Passion begins. As the cross looms on the horizon, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). To be what? To

be glorified. When is the Son of God glorified? When He's crucified. Even though He doesn't look it, He is just as glorious when He is bloodied and dying on the cross as when He is enthroned in heaven. Why? Because God is, by nature, a servant. Therefore, there is nothing more glorious for Him than to serve—and there is no greater service He can render than to die for the sins of the world.

So if you want the glory of God on earth, look to the cross. You don't have to wait around for something magnificent to happen for God's glory to be a part of your life: for the sake of Christ and Him crucified, the Lord delivers to you forgiveness even now. You don't see the glory—you hear it. The Father said, "Listen to Him," remember?

Because you're forgiven for Jesus' sake, you're a holy child of God. But just as a traveler doesn't carry all he has while he's away, so you appear less than glorious in this world. But the Lord is with you even now. Others will look at their daily bread—food, clothing and the like—and say, "Same old, same old—why doesn't God do something glorious for me?" But as a child of God you say, "Whether He provides me with a lot or a little, the same or something different, the Lord is still at work to meet my daily needs. He serves me—how glorious is His service, for He will not fail me as long as I'm in this sinful world." How do you know this is true? Because He tells you in His Word. You know this to be true, because you listen to Him.

When hospitalized, others will say, "Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't He do something glorious and heal me?! I want a miracle!" But as a child of God you say, "How glorious is God, that He has provided all of these doctors and nurses as His instruments for my healing! How wonderful that He has created me with a body that is able to heal over time—for while that healing may not be instantaneous, it is nevertheless miraculous! And should the Lord permit a disease or injury that leads to the death of my body, it is not my end—it is my deliverance from sin and death!"

See, if you're convinced that the glory of God in this world is always something extraordinary, something always seen, and something that sets you apart, then you will spend your days waiting for God to do something glorious; and in doing so, you will miss the glorious service that the Lord provides you every day with daily bread, with daily breath, and with every grace and mercy He pours out upon you because of His glorious death on the cross.

And when it comes to that glorious forgiveness, we add this: The Lord also gave it to you in your baptism, and He continues to give it to you in His Supper. They don't look like much—but they give forgiveness, life and salvation, for that is where the Lord is at work to save you. If you're looking for God to save you in glorious ways that are spectacular to the eye, you will hold His Word and Sacraments in contempt. You'll completely miss the day of His visitation.

But that is not for you. You rejoice in the Transfiguration, where you catch a glimpse of Jesus' heavenly glory. But until you are in heaven, you know that He shows His glory to you chiefly in His work of love and mercy. That grace He gives appears so lowly, but it is the glory that Christ has won by His cross—His cross for you. And so He declares you to be His glorious child,

because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen