

February 19, 2023
The Transfiguration of our Lord
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 17:1-9 (Exodus 24:8-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21)

THE GLORY OF GOD REVEALED IN JESUS.

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

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, the 17th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

It has been said that every year, hundreds of new religious movements are born; however, very few survive. Most false religions begin with one individual, a dynamic and compelling speaker, preying on the spiritually and emotionally lost, offering a roadmap for their place in life. Many of these leaders claim they *alone* heard a word of prophesy or saw a vision from an angel or their god – and then – they told someone else what they heard or saw. Some publish their beliefs and moral code as if it were scripture. Others disguise their false religion and false church by cleverly twisting the holy Word of God into false doctrines that suit their own passions and agendas. What they have might *look* and sound *similar* to the true Christian Church, but at the end of the day, all they offer are empty promises and eternal damnation.

Of course, a prophet hearing from God does not sound all that farfetched to us Christians. We know that long ago our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, spoke to His people of old in many and various ways. (cf: Hebrews 1:1) But there are two main things that all false religions lack. They lack the witnesses and they lack the Word.

In the ancient world witness testimony was vital for approval of accurate historical accounts. Witnesses were necessary to establish testimony in a court of law. In the book of Deuteronomy God commands that legal charges only be made on the evidence of two or three witnesses. (cf: Deuteronomy 19:15) Even today investigators seek out witnesses with first-hand knowledge of a crime to provide crucial information to help solve a case.

The false religions of the world do not have witnesses. They do not have the Word. On the other hand, the true Christian Church on earth does. The true Christian Church is wherever the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God is proclaimed in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. You know that in that place, God is truly present with and for you – pouring out His gracious gifts forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation, won for you by Christ Jesus on Calvary's cross.

After St Peter made his great confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus began to teach His disciples that it was necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the religious leaders, be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead. (cf: Matthew 16:13–21) He told them if anyone would come after Him, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Him. (cf: Matthew 16:24) He told them:

“Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (Matthew 16:28)

Six days later, Jesus takes three of His twelve disciples: Peter, James and John, with Him up on a high mountain alone. While they were there, Jesus is suddenly changed in appearance. The disciples witness the Son of God reigning in His kingdom as He was ***transfigured***, which in the original language is the root for the word “***metamorphosis***.” (Beitzel, “Transfiguration,” Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, 2097) His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. (cf: Matthew 17:2) The three are witnesses. They get a glimpse of Jesus’ glory, His divinity shining through His humanity. True God and true Man all in the same Person shining with the glory of God.

God has a history of revealing Himself on mountains. The angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ, appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush on Mount Horeb. (cf: Exodus 3:1–6) The fire indicated the presence of God and His presence was confirmed in His spoken Word.

Later, when Moses led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, the glory of the Lord dwelt with them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night (cf: Exodus 13:21–22) all the way to that same mountain, also called Mt Sinai. (cf: Exodus 19:1–9) As we heard in our Old Testament lesson, God invited Moses up the mountain to give Him the Commandments written on stone. Our text says:

“The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.”
(Exodus 24:16)

Moses later wanted to see God’s glory, up close, face-to-face. (cf: Exodus 33:18–23) But because the sinful man cannot see God’s face and live, God stood Moses in a cleft in the rock, a cave, as the glory of God passed by. Still later, once Israel had built the tabernacle a cloud covered the tent and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle, as it would later fill the temple. (cf: Exodus 40:34; 2 Chronicles 5:14)

Almost 600 years later, Elijah was hiding from Queen Jezebel in a cave on that same mountain when the Word of the Lord came to him. (cf: 1 Kings 19:9–18) Elijah was depressed and feeling sorry for himself and wanted to see the glory of God. So God showed His almighty power in a strong wind – and then an earthquake – and then a fire. But these were no comfort and assurance to Elijah. Then finally God’s Word came to him in a low whisper, which strengthened Elijah. The Word might seem simple, weak, and lowly to the unbelieving world, but God is present in His Word, bringing about His will in an unspectacular way.

Fast forward almost one thousand years, on a high mountain, God in the flesh, reveals Himself as true God and true man to Peter, James, and John, in His transfiguration. The glory that once went before Israel out of Egypt and then covered Mt Sinai and filled the tabernacle and temple, is now seen in Jesus. God with us. Immanuel.

Suddenly with Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah the Old Testament prophets of God. It was as if Moses representing the Law and Elijah representing the prophets, were confirming the Gospel of Jesus and His fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. But Jesus alone shines with glory. Moses and Elijah are taking with Him about His departure which he was about to accomplish at

Jerusalem. (cf: Luke 9:31) Right in the middle of this holy and sacred conversation the impulsive Peter interrupts. Peter is soaking up the glory of the moment and wants to prolong the mountaintop experience by making three tents – one for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah. In a sense, lumping Jesus together with Moses and Elijah, as if they were as glorious as Jesus.

Before Peter could begin pitching tents, a thick cloud overshadowed the mountain – the same cloud that guided Israel out of Egypt, the same cloud that covered Mt Sinai and filled the tabernacle and temple. And from the cloud there came the voice of the Father, almost repeating His words spoken at Jesus’ baptism:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matthew 17:5)

Listen to Jesus, the Word become flesh. The Word Jesus speaks is what the Father speaks. (cf: John 8:26) His Word are the words of eternal life. (cf: John 6:68) Neither Moses nor Elijah can save you, but they can point you to the One who can. Only Jesus can save you. Only Jesus bears your sin, your death, the punishments of the Law.

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5)

Moses and Elijah reflected the glory of God just as you are called to be light to the world, reflecting the glory of God. But Christ Jesus alone shines with the glory of God. Moses and Elijah were like the moon reflecting the sun. But only Jesus shines like the sun with His own light. Moses and Elijah reflected the light. Only Jesus is the Light of the world. Whoever follows Him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. (cf: John 8:12)

In His Transfiguration, Jesus allows His divine glory to shine through so that you understand that the cross and glory are not mutually exclusive categories. They are the divinely ordered sequence of salvation, both for Jesus who accomplishes it, and for you and all who receive salvation for Jesus’ sake. He is Transfigured so that that you fix your eyes Jesus:

“... the founder and perfecter of [y]our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” (Hebrews 12:2)

... so that while you must endure and carry your own cross, because of Jesus’ cross, death, and resurrection, you will one day be resurrected, transformed, and share in His glory. Martin Luther once wrote:

“It is true. Even though I am now destined for death, I seem to myself to be living; and I shall arise from the grave with glory and with a transfigured body.” (LW 5, 130)

The transfiguration sounds preposterous. It sounds like a magician’s stunt. It sounds like a vision that was passed along by a self-proclaimed prophet from a false religion. But a group hallucination is unlikely. If it had been Peter alone, or James or John were alone, perhaps it would be right to be skeptical. But all three men see the same vision, and two out of three write about it years later. In his Gospel account St John writes:

“... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

In his second epistle letter, St Peter writes:

“For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” (2 Peter 1:17)

Peter knows that the transfiguration is not some cleverly devised myth or false teaching. There are two main things that all false religions lack. They lack the witnesses, and they lack the Word. And Peter has both. He testifies that He, James, and John are eyewitnesses of Jesus’ majesty, the Word become flesh. (cf: 2 Peter 1:16) They were there. They physically saw Jesus and Moses and Elijah and their testimony is true.

It is instructive to notice the difference in the way the synoptic Gospel writers describe the mountain compared to St Peter. Saints Matthew and Mark were not witnesses and call it a “**high mountain.**” (cf: Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2) St Luke, who was also not a witness, calls it “**the mountain.**” (cf: Luke 9:28) But St Peter proclaims it to be a “**holy mountain**” because he himself was there to see Jesus transfigured on it. Peter knows that Jesus made that mountain holy by being transfigured there.

The writer the Hebrews says:

“¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...” (Hebrews 1:1–2)

God the Father says: “**Listen to him.**” Listen to Jesus. If it pleases the Father, He can give a vision or a word of prophesy. It is His prerogative. But Peter knows that where the Word of God is, there is the holiness of God. He writes that we have something more sure than visions. We have the written Scriptures of God’s appointed authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, such as Peter himself. (cf: 2 Peter 1:19–21)

Unlike the false religions of the world, you have the Holy Spirit inspired Gospel witness of the Word of God. The true Christian Church is wherever the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God is proclaimed in its purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. You know that in this place, God is truly present with and for you – pouring out His gracious gifts forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation, won for you by Christ Jesus on Calvary’s cross.

In the days of old, the sinful man could not look at God and live. But for Jesus’ disciples, and you and me, God has sent His Son in the flesh of man. Today, with eyes of faith, you can see the glory of Christ crucified – for you. And when He appears on the Last Day, you will be like Him and gaze upon His glory as you see him face to face. (cf: 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.