

“The Transfiguration”  
Matthew 4:8-11; 17:1-8  
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This story of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration is one of the strangest accounts in the life of Christ and as such, is frequently neglected by preachers and teachers alike. I have to confess that I have avoided this text MYSELF for I thought it was much too strange to warrant any serious consideration. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish minister and theologian A. B. Bruce once wrote: “The transfiguration is one of those passages in the Saviour’s earthly history which an expositor would rather pass over in reverent silence.” Yet, in SPITE of its bizarreness, I have now come to regard it as one of the TWO MOST PIVOTAL EVENTS in our Lord’s ministry. The first was his BAPTISM by his cousin John where, beside the Jordan River, Jesus was ordained and installed for his future ministry and where he received his anointing by the Holy Spirit- an event symbolized by the descent of a dove. As he came up from out of the water, a cloud appeared overhead accompanied by the voice of his Heavenly Father declaring, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” It was important that at the very outset of our Lord’s ministry Jesus receive the Father’s own “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval,” and that it come from out of God’s own mouth. From then on, Jesus knew that WHEREVER he went, WHATEVER he did, and WHATEVER he said, it would be with the Father’s complete and personal blessing. The assurance he received there at his baptism would provide him with all the confidence and courage to fulfill his destiny and go to that cross.

Now, more than three years later, Jesus finds himself at a rather OMINOUS juncture in his life and ministry. Rather than going out into the highways and byways, teaching and performing miracles as he had, the remainder of whatever time was left would now be spent preparing himself and his disciples for the endgame- that is, for his upcoming Passion in Jerusalem. Here on the mountain--and we’re not told what mountain it is--and in the presence of Peter, James, and John--his three most trusted lieutenants--we are informed that Jesus is suddenly “transfigured” or transformed before them, that his face becomes radiant like the sun and his garments white as light. Then two mysterious figures suddenly appear and begin conversing with him- one being Moses and the other Elijah. These men are the two great representatives of the Old Covenant with Moses representing the Law, and Elijah being the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. A NEW covenant was about to take its place with Christ as its fulfillment. With his death and resurrection, the Law would no longer be inscribed on tablets of stone but instead written upon hearts of flesh. Meanwhile, the prophets, who spoke of the coming of God’s kingdom, would ultimately find it realized in the person and work of Christ himself so that wherever he was welcomed and his teachings lived out, THERE is where the kingdom of God could now be found.

But then PETER, the “impetuous” one, the disciple whose brain and mouth never seemed to be engaged at the same time, has what he believes is an inspired idea. “Master,” he says, “it is good for us to be here; let us gather some branches from around the slopes and erect three booths, like those of the Feast of Tabernacles- one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He figures that by setting up multiple shrines, then all THREE of them could be worshiped and thus glorified together. Of course, the implication was that there would be NO NEED for a cross, NO NEED for Jesus to die, NO NEED for any sacrifice to be made. Jesus could then have his glory WITHOUT having to go to Jerusalem and subjecting himself to the dangers that awaited him there.

In response to this impulsive gesture, a mysterious cloud suddenly appears overhead similar to the one which had appeared at Jesus's baptism. And again, the very same words of assurance he had heard THEN are voiced, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." But THIS time it concludes with a loud rebuke of Peter for once again thinking that he knows better than Jesus HIMSELF does. "HEAR HIM!" thunders the voice. We are then informed that upon hearing that, the disciples are filled with SUCH fear and consternation that they fall upon their face until Jesus comes over, touches them, and tells them to get up so they can be on their way.

Well, what are we to make of this extraordinary scene and does it have anything to say to US this morning? Or should we, as A. B. Bruce suggested, "pass over it in reverent silence" because it is just too strange and there seems to be so little about this story we can personally relate to. After all, how many of US have ever been transfigured so that OUR faces became radiant as the sun after a special encounter with God; or how many of US have ever had a cloud emerge overhead and then heard God say from out of its midst that WE are his beloved children in whom he is well pleased? I for one can't say I ever have! And yet, I will argue that this is not only one of the most significant events in our Lord's ministry but that it is meant to be just as vital to each of US this morning.

You see, as Jesus begins that long, lonely trek to the cross, his encounter with the two greatest representatives of the Jewish faith and the repeated affirmations he receives in which he is declared God's beloved son- these become most critical to his confidence and hope in the same way that those same words at his baptism became for him throughout his ministry. What occurred that night on that mountaintop will sustain him right up to that cross, REGARDLESS of how terrible it would eventually get. He had experienced a foretaste of the great reward to come, a bit of heaven to help him bear his sufferings here on earth, and doubtless he would recall that moment again and again, ESPECIALLY in his most trying hours, comforting himself in the knowledge that he was INDEED God's Son- one in whom his Heavenly Father was well pleased! From that hour on, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem where he would eventually lay down his life for his sheep.

The ending to this story is perhaps the most overlooked part of the entire drama- that while the three disciples cower on the ground after having been chastised by the Father, Jesus goes over to them, touches them, and says "Rise, and have no fear." This is not an insignificant detail but actually a very profound moment. When you read the gospels, you soon notice that when Jesus healed, he would frequently touch the person and then command him or her to "rise up." With these words, Jesus is not simply helping the individual to his or her feet. For instance, when Jesus cured Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew chapter 8, we are told he touched her hand and instantly she "rose up"; and when he healed the paralytic in Matthew chapter 9, he said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and go home"; and then at the end of the same chapter, it says that Jesus delivered a young girl from death by taking her by the hand and then "raising" her up. In such instances, Jesus uses his touch and then commands the person to arise. Interestingly, the word Matthew uses again and again here for "rise up" is the Gk. word "egeiro" meaning "to be resurrected." And so what Matthew implies in each of these accounts is that some kind of "resurrection" took place in their lives so that they were never again the same afterward. Jesus had touched them and raised them up, and from that moment on, everything about them was now changed. Just at the point when they thought all hope was gone, they obtained a whole new lease on life, a whole new future filled with new promise and new possibilities- and all because they had experienced "resurrection" at the hand of Christ.

Now when we apply this insight to the end of the scene here on the Mount of Transfiguration, we see how in the same manner that Jesus had touched others and raised them up so that they were now

“resurrected,” that is, suddenly MADE ALIVE--alive to FAITH, alive to JOY, alive to HOPE, alive to LOVING AND ACCEPTING LOVE IN RETURN--so now he touches his DISCIPLES and RAISES THEM up from out of all their perplexity and their fear. In his order for them to get up, Matthew once again uses the same word “egeiro” or “to be resurrected” which he had used earlier and as a result, they TOO are “resurrected” so that the three of THEM are no longer ever the same. Just as Jesus had experienced a foreshadowing of HIS glory by being transfigured in the presence of Moses and Elijah, so too do Peter and James and John experience a glory of their OWN, and it will become one of the most defining moments of THEIR lives. The remembrance of this extraordinary evening would fortify THEIR faith and embolden THEIR hearts so they could follow their leader wherever he led, even if it led to their OWN cross.

Years later, the Apostle Peter would write an epistle to the early Church for the purpose of strengthening their faith during a time of great trial and doubt. In it, he recalled an incident from his personal years with Jesus which he wanted them to remember- an event, he told them, that would help carry them through their toughest ordeals. He didn't choose one of Jesus's many healings or any of his miracles such as when he multiplied the loaves and fishes; he doesn't even point to Jesus's own resurrection or one of his many resurrection appearances. Rather, from out of the many hundreds of episodes he COULD have drawn from, he recalls THIS one particular scene here at the Mount of Transfiguration to undergird the fragile faith of that early church. He writes in the first chapter of his second epistle:

*For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 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,” we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter 1:16-19)*

The primary significance of the Transfiguration was to uplift and cheer Jesus with the thought of the glory that awaited him on the other side of his death. This peek at the reward to come was enough to help him proceed all the way to that bloody, God-forsaken cross. Well, this was no less true for Peter, James, and John--all eyewitnesses to this event. It was THEIR remembrance of that night that would inspire THEM and motivate THEM to stay true to their Lord REGARDLESS of the struggles and obstacles that lay ahead for THEM. This was a major turning point in their discipleship and though there would still be stumbles along the way, by recalling this scene to mind, they found their faith renewed and their resolve strengthened time and time again.

Now Peter wants this same event to serve as motivation for the EARLY CHURCH, and by extension- for US this morning. He wants US to know that in those times when WE are perplexed or downcast or afraid, we can take comfort in knowing that OUR God, OUR Heavenly Father will be there for US- supporting US even as he was there for them. We are assured that even as Christ could dispel all the dread and terrible confusion that filled his closest friends on that remarkable evening, he will come for US and no less dispel whatever fears or sorrows or perplexities we OURSELVES might feel amid our OWN dark nights. He will take OUR hand and utter those very same words he spoke to THEM: “Rise, and have no fear!” and in this way, we TOO shall be “resurrected”- RAISED UP from all our fear and sadness, RAISED UP from all our anger and resentments, RAISED UP from all our helplessness and brokenness and despair. Our lesson this morning attests to how Jesus has both the

DESIRE and the POWER to help us in OUR moments of greatest need. He will INDEED raise US up even as he did his OWN disciples and we will be able to follow him WHEREVER he leads with complete trust and confidence.

As Jesus and those disciples came down from that mountainside, they were no longer the same men who had gone up only hours earlier- they'd been profoundly changed. What they saw and heard would strengthen their hearts and fortify their faith for the rest of their lives. As Peter, WHO HAD WITNESSED THE EVENT HIMSELF, said, "We would do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts." In other words, even as this scene remained a constant source of inspiration to those disciples, WE are exhorted to recall it again and again OURSELVES that it might INSPIRE US to the same degree of faithful devotion that it did for them. It is meant to teach us that on this side of death, God no less offers US a foretaste of his glory, a glory his disciples shared in and one which eventually will be fully our OWN.

But now as we come to the end of our sermon, the "sixty-four thousand dollar question" is this: How can we recall something that never directly happened to US? How exactly can this scene inspire US two thousand years later and half a world away if we weren't there OURSELVES? Well, though none of US has ever seen or spoken to Moses or Elijah, WE DO KNOW JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF- him who was much greater than EITHER of these two men and who was THEIR Lord as well. WE PERSONALLY know him who died for us that we might live, who upon being resurrected now makes our heart his home. And though NONE OF US has ever had a cloud appear over OUR heads or heard a voice say to US "This is my beloved son, my beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased," nevertheless HE HAS TOLD US A THOUSAND times in a THOUSAND DIFFERENT WAYS that we are INDEED his children, that he loves us with an everlasting love and NOTHING will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. And though none of US has ever had OUR face made radiant like the sun or OUR garments changed so that they became white as light, through his grace and by his Spirit, we now inhabit the light of his HOLY PRESENCE where we ENJOY HIS FRIENDSHIP and EXPERIENCE HIS PEACE BOTH NOW AND FOREVER. This GLIMPSE of Christ's glory is but a FORETASTE of what God has planned FOR ALL HIS CHILDREN. And if we keep on reminding ourselves of it as Peter asks us to "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts," then WE TOO shall find in it all the strength and all the encouragement WE will ever need to follow Christ to the bitter end. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, how often we abandon hope and give in to despair when times get tough and trials become too "trying"- when we lose a loved one, when finances become precarious, when a son or daughter gets in trouble with the law. Whatever the problem is, the result is always the same- it robs us of our peace and joy and confidence in you. Help us to see the promise of your abiding love and presence in all situations, that regardless of how deep the valley is, we may be sustained by this hope even when we can't see or hear you. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*