

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Transfiguration of Christ: Preview of the Resurrection**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 17:1-8

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On this beautiful Easter morning I want to ask you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 17:1-8, or you can follow along on the screen as I read aloud:

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. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

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 him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

My outline this morning is very brief and simple:

Introduction

Transfiguration

Suggestion

Vindication

Introduction

What led up to the amazing incident of the Transfiguration of Jesus?

The time, Matthew tells us, is six days after Jesus spoke the words just preceding in the last verse of chapter 16. It is rather unusual for the Gospel writers to be so specific regarding timing; usually they are quite vague, using phrases like "after a while, then, in due time, etc." But I think there's a reason why he specifies the number of days that elapse between the time Jesus spoke the previous discourse and the Transfiguration. Look at the last verse of the previous chapter, 28:16. Jesus has just given His discourse on the demanding prerequisites of discipleship with these enigmatic words: "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Josh bravely tackled this verse last week by saying he was going to leave it for me.

Well, there are literally dozens of interpretations as to what it means, and some of those interpretations conclude that Jesus was just flat wrong. They say He promised the Second Coming would happen before those who were listening to Him had all died, and obviously it didn't, so He was wrong.

But He doesn't actually mention the Second Coming. And the fact that verse 28 is followed immediately by reference to a specific number of days between that promise and the Transfiguration gives us a hint that the two things are intimately related. "Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." And just six days later some of them, namely three, do indeed see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom.

In other words, the Transfiguration is, in a very real sense, the first glimpse the disciples receive of the coming Kingdom. Three of them are given the enormous privilege of seeing something no human being had ever seen—a glimpse of the glory Christ had before the Incarnation and to which He would be restored after the Cross. True, they would see it only briefly, but they would see it.

The people who experience this are Peter, James, and John. Why they? Well, they are Jesus' closest companions. We learn from the Scriptures that Jesus had varying levels of relationships. He preached to the great crowds. Among them were Seventy who became His prayer team and support team. Among the Seventy there were Twelve who became His apostles. And among the Apostles there were three who were with Him almost everywhere He went. Among the three His closest friend was apparently John.

The place where this took place was a mountain, but we have no way of knowing which one. If you go to Israel today, the guide will tell you which one, but he's just guessing.

The purpose for which Jesus is on the mountain in the first place is prayer, according to Luke 9:28. Jesus never took any step without the approval of His Father. Since He has set His sights on Calvary, as Josh showed so well last week, I suspect He is praying for strength and courage, and perhaps even confirmation from His Father. If so, His prayer is certainly answered. It is answered by means of the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration

Matthew says, "There he was transfigured before them." And the term he uses in Greek for "transfigure" is a word that is known to nearly all of us, because it has been brought into the English language as is. It is the word *metamorphosis*.

The metamorphosis. The dictionary defines metamorphosis as "a marked and abrupt change in the form or structure of an animal, such as a butterfly or a frog, a striking alteration in appearance." When a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, it is the same life but in a completely different form.

Jesus once lived in dazzling glory, was worshiped by angels, and enjoyed the splendors of Heaven. But He gave that all up in a kind of reverse metamorphosis to become one of us. He allowed His glory and majesty to be veiled in the womb of a virgin, and then in the body of a

baby, and then in the quiet life of a carpenter. He was distinct, of course, from His friends and neighbors in that He did not sin. But He was like them in every other respect. He was fully man and fully God, but His deity was hidden so that people did not recognize Him for who he was, just as one could never recognize a butterfly when looking at a caterpillar.

It was at His baptism that God the Father first removed the veil and identified the man Jesus as His Son. You will recall that when He was baptized, as recorded in Matthew 3, Heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. And a voice came from Heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Suddenly people began to take notice that this 30-something carpenter from Nazareth had words of wisdom beyond anything they had ever heard and was able to perform miracles beyond anything they had ever seen. But still they weren’t sure where His power came from. He left the fingerprints of God on everything He touched, but still they didn’t know what to do with Him.

Let’s not be too harsh on these early followers. If you had never heard of such a ridiculous notion as the Incarnation (God coming in human form), would you be quick to identify someone you had recently met as God—even someone who was exceptionally moral, bright, and powerful, someone who looked like you, ate like you, needed sleep like you, got tired like you, and put His pants on one leg at a time like you? God? I don’t think you would. It is quite understandable that Jesus was an enigma to His disciples.

So here God gives to Jesus’ three closest friends and disciples an even more powerful glimpse into the nature of Jesus. He desires to erase the enigma completely from their minds by showing them who He really is. Matthew tells us that as Jesus is transfigured His face shines as the sun—not because sunlight is falling on Him, but because His deity is allowed to break through. Mark adds that His clothing becomes whiter than any earthly laundryman could make it.

There’s another reason for the Transfiguration, however, besides revealing the divine nature of Jesus. The disciples need to know that glory and the Cross are not incompatible. You’ll recall from Josh’s message last Sunday that they couldn’t understand why Jesus needs to die. In fact, Peter actually rebuked Jesus for suggesting such a ridiculous thing.

Of course, He talked not only of His death but also of resurrection. But that, too, is totally beyond their comprehension. They had seen resuscitations from the dead, such as Jesus did for the daughter of Jairus in Luke 8. That was astounding, but when she came back to life she was still the same person in the same body, and she would die again some day. Jesus is promising something different and far greater—He will come back to life in a glorified body, never to die again. How are they to understand something they have never seen or known?

Well, the Transfiguration allows them to catch a glimpse of what the final resurrection is like, as opposed to mere resuscitation. They are for a brief moment seeing Christ in the permanent form He will assume after three days in the tomb. And the glory of His resurrection body should serve to ameliorate their fear of the Cross which lies ahead of Him (and, though unknown to them now, lies ahead of most of them as well).

Two witnesses. It says in verse 3, “Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.” This is unique. No other event in the Gospels involves the actual presence of heroes from the past. If you know Bible history, you know that Moses and Elijah had been dead a long time—Moses for 1400 years and Elijah for about 800. How can they appear here with Jesus? Well, my guess is that God allows these two to return from paradise in bodily form for this brief visit so they can add their testimony to the uniqueness of Jesus.

But why Moses and Elijah? Why not Abraham and David? Or Joseph and Daniel? Well, Moses and Elijah are the key representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Moses was the greatest Lawgiver—the one who gave to the Jewish people the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Old Testament (the Torah or the Pentateuch). And Elijah was the first of the great prophets.

Also I think there may be other reasons why these two witnesses are chosen. Both of them experienced a strange departure from this world. Moses was buried by God Himself on Mt. Nebo in a grave unknown to any man. Elijah never even died, but rather was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. Some have suggested, then, that Moses may be the representative of those saints who have died, while Elijah is the representative of those who will never die but will be taken to Heaven when Jesus comes again without experiencing physical death.

Furthermore, Moses received a unique revelation of God’s glory on Mt. Sinai, the glory of which was so great that his own face shown. In fact, the Jewish people had to shield their eyes when they looked at Moses (Ex. 24). Elijah likewise received a unique revelation of God’s glory on Mt. Horeb, when God appeared in an earthquake, then in fire, and finally in a still small voice (1 Kings 19). The point is that both of these men are eminently qualified to be witnesses to the transfiguration of Christ.

Now when Luke speaks of the Transfiguration, he tells us something that Matthew leaves out, namely the subject of the conversation between Jesus and the two witnesses.

The coming Exodus. In Luke 9:31 it says, “They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” The Greek word for departure is *exodon*, or exodus in English. I believe this is a deliberate allusion to the greatest moment in Israel’s history. In Moses’ day the people of God were delivered by God’s power from slavery in Egypt. That was the original Exodus. Now through Jesus the people of God will be delivered by God’s power from a far worse bondage, the bondage of sin. This will happen when Jesus dies on a Cross in Jerusalem and is resurrected from the dead three days later. This is the focus of conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

Suggestion (4).

“Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’” This is not Peter’s finest moment, but allow me to say what I can in Peter’s defense.

In Peter's defense:

- 1. He has just awakened from sleep.** When Jesus was praying, the disciples were usually sleeping, and that is what happens here. Luke 9:32 says, "Peter and his companions were very sleepy." Apparently awakened by the bright light of the Transfiguration, it took them a while to shake the cobwebs. I know I wouldn't want to be held accountable for everything I've said when just awakened out of a deep sleep, so I'm willing to cut Peter a little slack.
- 2. He recognizes the privilege that is his to just be present while the Transfiguration takes place.** He says, "It is good for us to be here."
- 3. He submits His suggestion about making three shelters to Jesus:** "Lord, it is good for us to be here. *If you wish*, I will put up three shelters." Whenever you're giving God advice, it's wise to add the words, "If you wish." (But it's even better not to give Him advice). A fourth positive thing we can say is that
- 4. He doesn't suggest building four tabernacles**, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for himself.

Nevertheless, there is still something wrong with Peter's suggestion. God is not pleased with it. I would suggest several factors:

To Peter's blame:

- 1. He speaks before he thinks.** This is about the umpteenth time Peter has opened his mouth before thinking. Someone has said that Peter had the original foot-in-mouth disease. In fact, Luke actually apologizes for Peter, telling us he didn't know what he was saying.
- 2. He misunderstands the significance of the occasion.** While recognizing "it is good for us to be *here*," Peter seems to be implying by his suggestion to build shelters that it is best to *stay* here, rather than to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. In fact, according to Luke, Peter speaks "*as* Moses and Elijah were leaving," which seems to indicate that his suggestion is designed to keep them from departing and to prolong this great experience.

But what he fails to understand is that this momentary disclosure of Jesus' glory would not become permanent until Jesus has accomplished the sufferings which are integral to his task.

Vindication by God (5)

It says, "While (Peter) was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them"

External confirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus. The cloud was a sign of God's presence and protection during Israel's wilderness wanderings. Remember the cloud that

protected them from the desert sun by day and the pillar of fire that gave them warmth and light at night? Now it appears again. And, by the way, it will appear twice more—at His ascension to Heaven after the resurrection, and at His Second Coming.

God’s declaration of the uniqueness of Jesus. Verse 5 adds, “. . . and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him! Peter, shut up!’” That last phrase is a marginal reading, but I can’t help but believe it is implied. Peter has suggested building three shelters to honor Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but God clearly and emphatically differentiates Jesus from Moses and Elijah. He says, not “these are my *prophets* whom I have chosen, listen to *them*,” but “this is my Son, whom I have chosen, listen to *him*.”

Jesus stands alone as the unique Son of God, chosen and loved by the Father. He is one of a kind. The Apostle John later writes of this experience, “We have seen *his* glory (not *their* glory), the glory as of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). And Hebrews 1 puts the uniqueness of Jesus this way:

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”

Conclusion: I want you to notice with me a stark contrast between the glory on the mountain summit and the shame and confusion we find in the valley below just a short time later. The very next chapter opens up with an argument among these same disciples as to which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. Amazingly it doesn’t take them long to lose sight of the uniqueness of Jesus as they argue over which of them would become Prime Minister in Christ’s Kingdom.

Raphael’s world-famous painting of the Transfiguration, on which the artist worked himself to death, dramatizes this contrast. In the upper part of the painting there is glory and order and light. In the lower part there is shame and confusion and shadows. The point he seeks to make is that of the text itself—we must keep our eyes on the risen Lord and “listen to Him,” or our lives will become chaotic and selfish and sinful.

There are many Moseses and many Elijahs vying for our spiritual attention today. There are many different denominations and houses of worship. There are many recipes for spirituality. Some are good, some are worthless, some are even downright evil. But the best are nowhere near as effective as listening to Jesus and imitating His life. He is the only way to God. The world does not need competing religious figures and examples. It needs a Savior.

“There is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given to men by which we *must* be saved.” (Acts 4:12). Have you bowed the knee to Jesus? Have you acknowledged Him as Lord? Have you received Him as your Savior?