

Matthew 17:1-9

17Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

A Glimpse of Glory

Our brains often get us in trouble, don't they? My brain often got me in trouble when I was in the army, because I was a low-ranking soldier who often expressed doubts about the wisdom of the orders I received from those who outranked me. And people who outrank you don't like it when you question their orders. I remember Sergeant Seabrook telling me, “Schaeffer, you ask too many questions.”

I don't think Sergeant Seabrook meant what he said; I think what I think Sergeant Seabrook really meant was that I pick the wrong time to ask questions. There's a time in battle when you actually do need to follow through with orders without asking questions, and later, assuming you're still alive, you can ask questions. Because there's really no such thing as too many questions. I mean, if we didn't ask questions we wouldn't get too far as a species. And if we settled for the first answer somebody gave us we wouldn't get very far either. We'd still think that the earth was flat, that *lunacy* was a spiritual ailment caused by the moon, that gods live in volcanoes.

And what is beautiful about the Bible is that it leaves us with a lot of questions: if you ever meet a person who says he understands everything in the Bible, RUN! Because the Bible is about God's revelation to humanity, and God is more than you or I can comprehend. Today's scripture passage is a good example of how God's revelation is beyond our comprehension. We have Jesus shining like the sun and Moses and Elijah appearing with him. It's enough to baffle the three disciples who are with him, who are confused and a bit scared. And the beauty is that the Bible makes no attempt at interpreting this. It's a revelation of God that exceeds our understanding. If you were to explain to someone what brought you to believe in God, it would likewise exceed our understanding. This is the nature of divine revelation.

The good thing is that there is some part of divine revelation that is comprehensible; God wants us to know him, and so he reveals his glory to us, sometimes in comprehensible ways like the beauty of an ocean beach or a moonlit night, but sometimes in pillars of smoke and fire, or in the resurrection of Jesus. The incomprehensible side of divine revelation is accompanied by things that ARE comprehensible. That was what Jesus was all about. Think of him as God coming to live and dwell with us so that we could get a close up of what living for God looks like. We've spent the last several weeks of this Epiphany worship series hearing what Jesus teaches us to do, and today we have the voice from the cloud telling us to “Listen to him!” And much of what Jesus tells us is quite comprehensible: “Love your

enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” “Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.” The greatest among you is the one who serves the most,” and “inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my children, you’ve done it for me.” These are teachings that we CAN wrap our heads around even if we can’t figure out some of what Jesus says or does, like what occurred at the transfiguration.

And perhaps the Transfiguration was really all about God revealing his glory, and while we can’t decipher everything that happened at the Transfiguration, we certainly know that Jesus wanted those three disciples to witness it. Yes, the experience was frightful and confusing, but those three disciples witnessed God’s glory. And what they saw would help them make sense of a lot of what Jesus had been saying and doing before his death and resurrection. When you read the Gospels, one thing becomes perfectly clear, and that is that the disciples were anything BUT clear about who Jesus was and what he was doing and saying before his death and resurrection.

I think that the Transfiguration was what enabled *at least three* of his disciples to put the pieces together after the Resurrection, because the way they saw Jesus on that mountaintop was the way they would see Jesus after the Resurrection. Until Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples assumed him to be a mere mortal – yes, Peter made his famous confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the most high God, but even Peter had assumed that the game was over when Jesus was crucified and laid in the tomb. Of course the disciples loved Jesus and knew him to be wise and gifted, even having special power to heal and to raise others from the dead. They also believed that he was the Messiah, but when he died they figured that they had been wrong. So at best Jesus been a wise teacher who described how beautiful life is in God’s kingdom, but from their pre-resurrection perspective it looked as if the kingdom of God had not come as Jesus had declared. But for those three disciples who had accompanied Jesus up that mountain and witnessed Moses and Elijah conversing with their illuminated Master, who heard God’s voice telling them to listen to his Son, perhaps there was some hope remaining in them. Having seen Jesus with Moses and Elijah, having heard God’s voice, and having Jesus tell them something about his resurrection, there may have been some belief that something amazing would happen. And of course something DID happen.

Many Jews had it right – that God was coming to reign on earth as in heaven, and that we would be raised up (i.e. ‘resurrected’) when history had run its course. What surprised them was that the Resurrection had occurred for a single person. The Resurrection made it clear to *everyone* that Jesus was something more than a mere mortal, and the Transfiguration was the spoiler for the Resurrection, with God declaring to Peter, John, and James, “This is my beloved Son; *Listen to him!*”

And if we listen to Jesus, to what he tells us in the Bible, we realize that he said so much more than “do this and don’t do that.” He was more than an ethics professor. He verified God’s promise that he would someday reign on earth as in heaven, and he also gave us a glimpse of what we might look like when we’re resurrected. We too may shine like the sun.

That being said, I want to take this sermon one level deeper and talk about what it means to shine like Jesus, and what that basically means is that we all **reflect** the glory of God the way that we were originally intended to reflect that glory, as God’s greatest creation. We blew it when we decided that we were so glorious that we didn’t need God anymore, but that brought us into conflict not only with God but with one another. God intends to restore us, to **TRANSFIGURE US** into the humans we were intended to be, before we somehow decided to have a go at existence without reflecting God’s glory.

And reflecting God's glory involves so much more than obeying a lot of ethics rules. Reflecting God's glory is about releasing our full potential as humans in relationship with God and with one another. We'll not only be living and caring for one another and worshiping God; we'll be completely fulfilled. Think of all the good that humanity has accomplished in our broken state of being; we've cracked the atom, we've mapped our DNA, we've begun to explore worlds millions of light years away (think of that expression! We have figured out that distance is also a factor of time), we've written wonderful poems and novels, composed and performed magnificent music, sculpted and painted fabulous works of art, invented great sports games, we've devised humor and recognized humor in all sorts of ways. And we've gained pleasure, perfectly legitimate pleasure, from all of these feats, and all this while we're broken! All this while we're in a state where our bodies decay and eventually end up as dust (I'll remind you that this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday). Imagine how great it will be when our bodies are no longer subject to decay and disease – imagine when we, like Jesus, will shine like the sun. Imagine how great it will be when we can invent and create and compose wonderful things while at the same time we tend to the needs of “the least of these.”

You know, I started this sermon by talking about questioning things, and I think that curiosity is one of the greatest attributes that God has endowed us with, and I think he made the universe as vast and complex as he has to ensure that we'll always have more questions. And one of the things that Jesus spent a lot of time doing was teaching people to think beyond rigid structures like the Law of Moses – the Law serves an important purpose in a broken world among broken people – it keeps them from killing each other. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, we are what the Apostle Paul calls “new creations in Christ.” We're not perfect yet, but that Spirit, the Spirit of God, frees us to fully reflect God's glory, to shine as bright as the sun.

And so my friends as we wrap up this worship series, this Great Invitation, and enter the season of Lent, I pray that you would recognize that you are blessed for simply being children of God, beloved by God, that you would recognize how far we've fallen so you can see how far God has gone to rescue us, and that you would see the place God is taking us, how he will transfigure us to be the perfect beings we were meant to be, and that you would rejoice in that splendid vision of a world fully restored to its original beauty. We still have a long road to walk down in this life, and it's a road marked with suffering and often lined with crosses. We, like Jesus, are called to walk that road, but we walk it with faith in resurrection, Jesus' and ours. We've been given a glimpse of glory, and it's enough to keep us all marching. Amen.