

Scriptures: Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

The Big Winner

For those of you who voted last week for the Chiefs, congratulations. You called it! Here locally, Agape was the big winner – it's a wonderful partnership we have with them. You know, we often talk about providing food items to them, but I've failed to mention the ways in which they help us – they do help us. They also give things to us. They've made the offer to provide snack items to us – and I suspect other area churches – when we have events like Vacation Bible School. They also have a non-profit store which sells a variety of items. That's where some of the candy for Trunk-or-Treat, Easter Egg hunts, and random prizes that the kids get at VBS and WOW come from. We get the paper for the bulletins from them at a much lower rate than any store could ever give us. There's a lot of working together behind the scenes that people just don't know about.

On the Church calendar today is Transfiguration Sunday. It's a day when we look at the identity of the One we follow. It's also the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season. Lent is a reminder that we are on a pilgrimage as followers of Christ – moving ever closer towards God's Kingdom – just as we read year after year of Jesus being on His way towards Jerusalem and Good Friday's cross. So today, we look at a brief event contained in Holy Scripture, where time momentarily stopped on a mountaintop, and a couple ordinary guys were able to "see Him as He is," (1 Jn. 3:2). Turn with me to Matthew 17:1-9, and let's look at Matthew's recording of what has come to be known as the Transfiguration of Christ. **Read Matt. 17:1-9.**

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. And all who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure," (1 John 3:2-3). Our Gospel passage opens with the phrase, "After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves," (Matt. 17:1). Some versions say, "Six days later." To understand the context of the Transfiguration, we have to look several verses earlier, towards the last third of chapter 16. When we do that, we find that nearly a week earlier Jesus had told the apostles that He was going to die, and Peter rebuked Him. "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (16:22), to which Jesus famously responds, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men," (verse 23).

Changed Before Them

Thus, the Transfiguration of Christ is tied very much to Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, and the cross. Over the years I've read this, and often wondered, why Peter, James, and John? Why not Judas? I don't know for sure. Though, in Judas' case, would seeing Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop have changed anything about him? Who knows! When you look at the larger Gospel record, you see kind of an inner circle within the apostles, made up of Peter, John, and James. These are the same guys who were with Jesus in the garden on the night He was arrested.

"There He was transfigured before them," (verse 2), Matthew records. What does that even mean? Jesus' appearance changed. He changed before them. "His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light," the writer tells us. It's a little bit vague of a description. I mean, we're missing a lot of details. Things like, what color were His eyes? His hair? His skin? The main thing Matthew wants us to be aware of is that these three, inner-circle apostles got to see Jesus momentarily in His glorified state, before His death and resurrection.

I can remember hearing as a kid growing up in church, pastors and Sunday School teachers say, "we're New Testament people, the Old Testament was for the Jews, and it doesn't apply to us anymore." I believed that line of thought for many years – but it's wrong. It's not accurate. We're people of the Bible – and that includes the Old Testament. We have that set of books as a library of what righteous living ought to look like. God tells His people time and time again in the Old Testament what they have to do to live righteous lives, as holy people set apart for Him. Time and time again, they failed. See, people can't reach God's gold standard – the Old Testament Law. You and I, we can't do it.

Moses and Elijah

That's why Jesus came – He's the only One who could ever reach that standard God had set. It's why He had to die on the cross. To atone for our inability, and oftentimes, our unwillingness to attempt to hold ourselves to God's standards – the Old Testament Law. And so we see, in this text, "There appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus," (verse 3). Moses – every Jew knew him and what he had done. Even the Sadducees and Pharisees could agree on Moses. He did great stuff for God's people as God's servant.

We heard earlier today that Moses had gone up to the mountaintop to get the Law from God. What we didn't hear was the after-effects. Moses came down the mountain, and had to wear a veil on his face, because his appearance from being in God's presence had changed and it terrified the people. When you read about that in Exodus 34, the Hebrew word used is related to "horn." So when St. Jerome translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin, he translated the word literally. If you look at art – paintings

and sculptures of Moses from the Middle Ages, they portrayed him literally – with little horns coming out of his head (picture:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0f/%27Moses](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0f/%27Moses%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU140.jpg)

[%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU140.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0f/%27Moses%27_by_Michelangelo_JBU140.jpg)). It's kind of funny – that's not how we portray someone radiant with God's presence today!

Moses brought God's Law down from the mountaintop to God's people. Elijah was a great prophet of Old Testament times. He stood up to wicked kings and queens, like Ahab and Jezebel, and kept calling God's people back to repentance. He never actually died – Elijah was carried away to heaven in a chariot of fire. So Jesus is on the mountaintop, talking with two of the most well-known men in Jewish history – Moses the Lawgiver, and Elijah the Prophet. Luke's gospel (9:30) records that the three of them were talking about Jesus' coming death.

Mountaintop Experiences

“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,’” (Matt. 17:4). This is a mountaintop experience for Peter, James, and John. Have you ever had a mountaintop experience where things just seemed so perfect, so right, you just didn't want the moment to end? I've had a few: watching each of my newborn children in their moms' arms; seeing Jesus in a dream; getting married in North Carolina on a sunny August day back in 2007; going to the Rings Experience with Kendra at the church in Fletcher in 2013. I could add more, if I had more time!

I'm talking about great times that you wish could last forever. Oftentimes mountaintop experiences are the catalysts for transformation. When you've been to the mountaintop, you never see things quite the same way again. But they aren't meant to last forever. That was Peter's problem – he wanted to hold onto the moment. It's also the problem for those of us who've been to a marriage retreat, or gone on a Walk to Emmaus – try as we might, it's just about impossible to keep the old flame burning. We try to compensate by busying ourselves, trying to rekindle a spark that was never meant for us to keep hold of, but rather to pass along to the next person who needs the light.

Mountaintop experiences are best understood as moments in time – significant moments, to be sure – but moments, nonetheless. In which case, it's nice to keep a journal or a scrapbook to flip through once in a while and put back on the shelf as we go on to whatever God has in store for us next. “While he [Peter] 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!’” (verse 5). Of course we know – Peter and the guys knew – the voice speaking from the cloud was God the Father. What He tells them is the same thing He said at Jesus' baptism.

Jesus, Son of God

It becomes very clear to them that Jesus is truly the Son of God. “When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified,” (verse 6). If you audibly heard the voice of God the Father speak from a cloud, how would you react? Afraid? I’d be afraid! It’s not a normal, ordinary thing for us to hear the voice of God – at least not in this sense. I believe He speaks to us all the time – we’re just too busy, too numb, or too dumb to realize it. I suspect along with being terrified, they were also somewhat shocked. Can you imagine? Seeing Jesus, fully as He is – they had to have been in awe at what they were seeing.

Instead of gloating, coming along and saying, “See, Peter, I told you so,” look what Jesus did. “But Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ He said, ‘Don’t be afraid,’” (verse 7). He goes to these three followers, just as they have had the fear of God struck into them – and as God – stoops down to comfort them with His touch and gentle voice. “Listen to Him,” and “Get up, don’t be afraid,” are the message and command of God. These three directives intertwine. Comfort and compassion can be just as overwhelming as terror or fright, and just as awe-inducing.

How many times do we hear Jesus tell someone He’s just healed in Holy Scripture to “Get up?” He calls us to listen and obey. To take up our cross – deny ourselves – and follow Him. And so, “When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus,” (verse 8). And they followed Him. “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead,’” (verse 9).

It was a mountaintop experience, but it was just a single moment in time. Mountaintop experiences inevitably lead to the valleys below. If you read on in Matthew’s gospel, they come down the mountain and meet a man with a son suffering from epilepsy, begging for Jesus to heal him. Our mountaintop experiences are best seen as fleeting moments in time leading to a new chapter of sacrifice and service, all to the glory of God.

We Don’t Like Valleys

In our humanness, we do not like the valleys. We’d rather have mountaintop after mountaintop of experiences, but this isn’t the way God works. While in Licensing School in 2020, a couple of the assigned texts were written by Roman Catholic Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen. Writing 39 books, he had a heart for the disabled, and applied his theology in the way he lived. He loved God and others. He maintained a life-long vow of celibacy, yet wrote extensively about wrestling with a desire for physical intimacy. After his death, his journals were published. They reveal that the intimacy he wrote so extensively about wanting was directed towards other men. In one of his books, he writes, “Our service will not be perceived as authentic unless it comes from a

heart wounded by the suffering about which we speak. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others.” He took what he wrestled with in the valley, and turned it into something God could use to reach and help others.

So, does God use sinful, flawed people, to further His Kingdom? I ask you this frequently because I want you to think. God gives us brilliant intellects, and expects us to use them. He’s given you a mind designed for wisdom and discernment when you’re firmly rooted in His word. Don’t drink the Kool-Aid of what your friends or a single source of information tell you through the grapevine. Here lately, you may have heard of the revival happening down in Kentucky at Asbury College. People are acting all surprised by it, like revival is something new. I don’t understand that. I’m not surprised by it. I’m glad it’s happening, and coming ever closer this way. I say, with many others, “Come Holy Spirit, You are welcome here!”

Revival’s been happening across this country, and around the globe, for years. We just don’t hear about it. We don’t look for it. We don’t pay attention to what God’s doing in the world. Where it’s happening, or who it’s happening to, in most cases they’re people who aren’t like us. So we turn a blind eye to what the Spirit’s doing because it doesn’t fit our narrative. It’s only when it hits someplace with a similar slant to our views and perspectives that we start to pay attention, and then are wowed by the idea that He’s doing great things. So I’ll ask again, does God use sinful, flawed people to further His kingdom? Friends, we have brothers and sisters – misguided by what others have told them – who don’t think God will use “sinners” to fulfill His purposes. Jesus certainly used sinful, flawed people in the Gospels and the book of Acts – He used Judas, who betrayed Him, and Peter, who denied Him, didn’t He? He used a woman at a well to bring an entire village to faith. He used a persecutor of the Church to be the first missionary to the Gentiles. He uses me and you.

Called into the Valleys

People who experience valleys – painful realities of life – often bear the marks to prove it. If we’re willing to accept our disappointments and losses, entrust them to God, in time we’ll come to better reflect the image of Christ. But friends, in doing that, we can’t stay on the mountaintop. We can’t try to make a momentary peak into a permanent plateau. Our faith is both communal – lived in community – and individual. And friends, we can’t afford to be complacent. We’ve got to get out of the rut we’ve allowed ourselves to slip into. We have to be unafraid of trying to do things a little differently than what we’ve grown accustomed to here, because we’ve got to “Get up,” and get moving – there’s a world needing Jesus out beyond our walls!

On April 3, 1968, a speech was given by Dr. Martin Luther King, in Memphis, Tennessee. Entitled, *I've Been to the Mountaintop*,¹ King wrapped his up speech that night by saying this:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

King was assassinated the next day. Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, washed His disciples' feet before the meal. Have you ever thought deeply of that episode in Holy Scripture? Christ was wrapped in a towel, washing their feet. All of their feet. Even the feet of Judas Iscariot, who would betray Him with a kiss just a few short hours later. Have you ever pondered on that before? I wonder if our Savior silently wept onto Judas' feet as He washed them, knowing what He would soon go through because of Judas' betrayal. It's heartbreaking. Christ knows Judas is going to turn Him over to be killed in the cruelest, most painful way imaginable, but He washes his feet anyway. He makes Judas feel included – even loved. Paul tells the church in Corinth, "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres," (1 Cor. 13:7). That's Jesus – towards Judas even on the night He was betrayed – and to us still today.

We can't build shelters on the mountaintop – He calls us to come down into the valleys with the rest of His people – to help alleviate the suffering we see all around us. This Wednesday night, we'll start traveling through the valley of Lent, with a meal at 5:30, and worship starting at 6:00. May God give us such mountaintop experiences as this: that, by His grace, we, too, may be instruments of peace and love, and so help reconcile the world to God through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer: Holy God, You have spoken to Your people through the Law, through the prophets, and through the psalmists. You have spoken to us through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Empower us, re-create us, sanctify us into His image, so that all we do glorifies You. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *I've Been to the Mountaintop*, retrieved 2/16/23, from <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>.