

Last Sunday after the Epiphany; The Transfiguration of our Lord; February 11, 2024
+ Mark 9:2-9 +
“Glimpse the True Jesus”

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain where they were alone by themselves. There he was transfigured in front of them. His clothes became radiant, dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them. And Elijah appeared to them together with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say because they were terrified.

A cloud appeared and overshadowed them, and a voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.”

Suddenly when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

The gift did not look the way I expected. I had asked for something very specific from a person who reliably delivered it on Christmas, unless my request was totally unrealistic, like a spaceship or an elephant. But by now I was old enough to know where to set my limits, and had not been disappointed in the past few years. But the shape was all wrong – not a rectangle. So was the size – bigger than a brick. So was the feel – too squishy. Would I really be getting a sweater instead of my desired Gameboy?

But on Christmas Eve, once the wrapping paper was off, the puzzle made sense. Under the wrapping paper, the gift was covered in thick bubblewrap, which added to the size, shape, and feel. It was the exact present that I thought was coming. It had just been masked and hidden.

In many ways, this is what happened with Jesus. The promises of the Messiah were clear that the Savior would be divine – God. And yet what did Jesus look like? Isaiah also promised there would be nothing overly attractive about his physical appearance. So if you were living at that time, he would’ve looked no different than you or your neighbor. We have seen through this Epiphany season that yes, in many ways, Jesus and others revealed Jesus’ deity in words and actions. But there still would’ve been this nagging question in the minds of people seeing and listening to Jesus: “Really? *This* guy? *He’s* the Messiah?”

So that brings us to the Transfiguration, a moment later in Jesus’ ministry where he sets aside all doubt as to who he is and focuses directly on what he has come to do. As we come closer and closer to our Lenten journey that will take us down the path of difficult self-examination and seeing the price our sins cost our Savior, we will keep the events on this hilltop in mind because it gives us perspective. For as difficult as it will be to see our Savior’s Passion, for as weak he may appear, this Gospel gives a glimpse of the true Jesus, the Savior who came to be our champion.

For this event, Jesus takes just the “inner circle” with him—Peter, James, and John. It was just the four of them because, as the *de facto* leaders of even the twelve disciples, there was something important for them to see. It is likely that as these three closest friends of Jesus climb the mountain with him, they are

not expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen. Jesus often climbed mountains, alone to pray, together with his disciples to pray and teach. But this was not an ordinary day. **There he was transfigured in front of them.** The Greek word for “transfigured” gives us the word “metamorphosis.” It is drastic, unmistakable change. Jesus’ appearance changes from something that masks his true nature into showing who he really is. **His clothes became radiant, dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them.** This was not a wardrobe change on Jesus’ part. He didn’t bring a brighter set of clothes with him. These clothes were supernaturally white. The other Gospel writers use words like **lightning** and **the sun** to describe Jesus’ changed appearance, both his clothing and his face.

This is Jesus showing himself to be God as he is. He isn’t just like you or your neighbor. This is God who had taken on our human nature. And that’s important because in order to be the Savior of the world, our Savior needed to be God. No one else but God could live the perfect life we needed, and make that life count for all people. No one else but God could have his death count for everyone. This glimpse into Jesus’ true nature is meant as a comfort for the disciples, then and now. “Yes, what you will see will be difficult to watch. It will appear that I am powerless, but I am not. I am doing this to save you and everyone else from their sins.” Because this is also the true nature of Jesus: to surrender glory – to lay it down for the good of others. In this case, for us and for our salvation.

As if this is not enough to take in in the moment, it is suddenly not four on the hilltop, but six. Moses and Elijah, two of God’s servants from the Old Testament appear to speak with Jesus. Moses is the great Law-giver, and the Elijah the great prophet. They appear so we will see Jesus as he is: the fulfillment of Old Testament, also known as the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Luke recounts in his Gospel that they were talking about Jesus’ upcoming “**departure,**” that is his death. Note with what focus Jesus approaches your need for a Savior! Nothing deters him; he is laser-focused on your forgiveness. Everything is leading to the cross and the empty tomb. It’s all leading to a triumphant “**It is finished!**” amid apparent defeat, and the glorious proclamations of “**He has been raised!**” And this was all for us and for our salvation.

We can sympathize a bit with Peter, can’t we? Here is Jesus in his glory as God, and now here are two revered heroes of faith from the past. Who wouldn’t want to stay? And who wouldn’t be scared out of his wits? Peter’s offer to put up the tents makes some sense in a terrified-beyond-rational-thought sort of way. This is what happens to sinners in the presence of God – terror. Yet he is a God who loves us and saves us – so we want to stay, too. Our sin makes it impossible to stand in his presence, but knowing that our Savior stands with us makes us say, “It is good to be here – in God’s presence.” And it makes us look forward to the day when our sin will gone from us completely, and we’ll be able to say with no fear at all, “It is good to be here,” as we see all of God’s glory face-to-face.

And if Peter has any clarity on what is about to happen—the gut-wrenching upheaval that is coming to all of their lives beginning in the Garden of Gethsemane—that would be all the more the reason to want to just stay up here forever. But that’s not the plan. It’s not the plan for Jesus to just be here put in time in peace. And that isn’t the plan for Peter, James, and John either. They all have work to do. They all have difficulty to endure. And it will all be for the good of those around them, for the good of all who so desperately needed the forgiveness that God freely provides.

We get to experience good times that we hope will never end; we have to endure trials that we wish would end immediately. But the Savior who shows a glimpse of his power at his transfiguration stands by us in all of it, blessing the good and working the bad for our eternal benefit. Peter wants to stay with Jesus on the top of that mountain, but Jesus has bigger plans. Not an extended camping trip, but an eternity of perfection with our God. That is what he came to do, so they cannot stay there that day.

But before they break camp and move on, a cloud envelops them, likely the same cloud pillar that led the Israelites through the wilderness, the same glory of the Lord that surrounded the shepherds at Jesus' birth. This is the presence of God made clear. Here the Father speaks again, as he did at Jesus' baptism. But this time the Father speaks not to Jesus, but to the disciples, **"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."** At Jesus' baptism the words were spoken mostly to strengthen him. Here they are spoken mostly to strengthen his followers: take this glimpse of who Jesus really is: God who lays his glory down and goes down to save and win glory everlasting for sinners; God, who still goes with you down every mountain, through every time of suffering in your own life, until glory everlasting.

Jesus is going to ramp up how blunt and clear he is with his disciples in the days ahead. He's going to be clear about the suffering he'll undergo—the betrayal, arrest, condemnation, death, burial, and even the resurrection. Peter had already been direct with Jesus that these things should never happen to him and Jesus had to rebuke him as a messenger of Satan trying to veer him off course. The Father's message for the disciples is clear, "Jesus knows what he's doing. He's doing what is right. I love him and his dedication to the mission that I sent him on. **Listen to him.**"

None of this is going to make sense in the moment. It's going to seem weird, out of place, and shocking. It's going to continue to seem like this Messiah is not the Savior that we expected. And so Jesus makes it clear that, for now, the disciples shouldn't talk about this. Not until after he has been raised from the dead, because only then will all of the pieces fit together. Even in this moment, they don't really understand what he is talking about in regard to the resurrection. But they will in time.

As we continue to go through trials and difficulty, as we continue to hope for and wish for the relief from trials we have and to experience blessings we long for but have not received, as we seek to understand what God is doing in our lives and why he's doing it, take this scene and the Father's words to heart. Your Savior knows what he's doing. He's conquered sin and death for you and will bring you to his heavenly glory when the time comes. Until that day, rest easy in the one who might not have looked the part, but who is your heaven-sent Savior. Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.