

Sermon for the Transfiguration of Our Lord (March 6, 2011)

Exodus 24:8-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Pr. Shane Cota

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a bit like those movie previews they play before the featured attraction, the ones narrated by the guy with the big voice. They reveal just enough of the movie to make you want to see it, without giving away too much of the plot. Coming soon to a theater near you. A sneak preview of coming attractions. And that's what the Transfiguration is. A sneak peak, a glimpse of Jesus' glory as the Son of God and the coming attraction of the kingdom He brings with His dying and rising. It was a glimpse of heaven and resurrection glory.

Just six days before today's Gospel reading Jesus told His disciples - *"I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."* And then they had a whole week to think about it and wonder. Who was He talking about? And when? And where? And what will happen, what will they see? So many questions. Six days after saying that some of them would not taste death until they saw the kingdom of God, Jesus went up to a mountain to pray along with three disciples - Peter, James, and John. Two or three witnesses were required to establish a truth. Jesus is making sure that future generations who would hear of this would be able to trust that it happened. Peter, James, and John are given a unique privilege and gift - to see Jesus in His glory prior to His death, resurrection, and ascension.

Right before the three disciples Jesus' face was changed in appearance, and His clothing became dazzling white. What was going on there? This was an "epiphany," a manifestation. Jesus' divinity was shining through His humanity, causing His face and clothing to glow with a heavenly brightness. It was a visual reminder that this Jesus was certainly man but He was no ordinary man. He was also God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Though deeply hidden beneath His humanity, Jesus' divine nature and His glory as the Son of God were there. They were simply hidden from the eye.

In the OT, Moses glowed when he came down from Mt. Sinai after meeting face to face with God. It's as though the glory of God's presence rubbed off, or at least created a temporary effect. It was kind of like a glow in the dark watch that glows for a while after being placed in the sun. With Moses, that was a temporary and fading glory, indicating that his covenant was temporary and fading. But Jesus' glow came from within Himself, as every cell of His humanity glowed with the glory of God. This was the glory that filled the tabernacle and the temple. This was the glory of the pillar of cloud and fire. This was the sign that God Himself was present on this mountain. This was the Lord's mountain of which Isaiah had spoken, the mountain where God would reveal His glory to the nations and the nations would flock to the Lord.

With Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah. Elijah had been whisked off to heaven in chariots of fire. Moses had been buried by God Himself in a secret location. They represented the Law and the Prophets. The Law had come through Moses on Sinai. Elijah was the first and foremost of the prophets. And here they appear together with glorified Jesus. Jesus had come to fulfill Moses and the Prophets. Moses and Elijah had pointed forward to Jesus as "types," and now the fulfillment was standing there in His glory and they in glory with Him. It's a little sneak preview of the resurrection, when those long dead will rise in Jesus' glory.

Luke tells us that they were talking with Jesus about His departure which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. The word Luke uses in his Gospel is “exodus.” They were talking about His exodus, and who better to talk about that than Moses? This vision of Jesus in glory is anchored in Jesus’ death on a cross and His resurrection from the dead and His ascension forty days later. This is His “exodus” by which He brings all of His people through death to life and glory. The transfiguration is a preparation for that. The Jesus who shines like the sun, who radiates the glory of God on earth, is the same Jesus who hangs dead in the darkness on Good Friday bearing the sin of the world. You need to make that hard connection between the mountain of transfiguration that proclaims Jesus the Son of God and Mt. Calvary, the mountain of His cross, that proclaims Him the Savior of the world. This is what Moses and Elijah were talking about with Jesus.

And then, interrupting this heavenly conversation, Peter blurts out, “*Lord, it is good that we are here,*” meaning it’s good we’re here to see this. He tries to capture the moment, memorialize it, kind of the way we have to take a snapshot of everything. It’s as though Peter pulled out his cellphone and said, “Could you guys pose for a quick picture? Moses, would you move in a little closer? Elijah, slide over a bit to your left. There. Good. Now hold that pose and smile. Peter wants to build three tents, three booths as in the Feast of Booths when all Israel lived in a tent on Jerusalem’s hillside. One for Moses, one for Elijah, one for Jesus.

We do that. We want to preserve our uplifting “religious moments.” The ecstatic experience. The feeling. The vision. Whatever. We want to memorialize the mountaintop. Make it the normative thing. We’re like junkies for the religious experience. Luke tells us that Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. Whether it was fear or astonishment or whatever, visions like this defy words and our ability to fully comprehend them. Peter wanted to stay in the moment of glory, enjoy a permanent emotional high. The problem is that just six days ago Jesus had told Peter that it was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and die and rise again. Peter had gotten upset and said, “This shall never happen to you, Lord.” Jesus strongly rebuked Peter and said, “*Get behind me, Satan.*” Jesus actually called Peter “Satan” because Peter did not want Jesus to go to the cross.

This mountaintop experience is just a foretaste of the glory to come, but the cross must come first. Death must come before resurrection. Life in this broken, sinful world must come before the heavenly glory and the eternal kingdom of God. This is a lesson Peter would learn, and it is a lesson that we need to learn. As Jesus also told His disciples six days earlier, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” That’s it. There’s no way around the cross for Jesus, no way around it for His disciples. You have to lose your life in the death of Jesus to find it. The Jesus-shaped life is in the shape of a cross. Jesus and His disciples didn’t institute or believe in some fun-time religion of entertainment and shallow emotionalism that gets confused with real spirituality.

So many American versions of Christianity hardly bear any resemblance at all to what we hear about in the Holy Scriptures, in the inspired and true Word of God. So much of the Christianity we see promoted around us is all about glory right here, right now in this life. Yet the life of Christ and the Christian, according to Scripture, is about the way of the cross. This is why the real Christianity of the Bible is so incomprehensible to so many Americans. It’s why so many churches have trashed the preaching of the Word in order to please the expectations of those who

want church to be some kind of religious funhouse or just a stamp of divine approval on whatever they want to think or believe. Why crack open the Word of God when we can make up our own religion and just pretend we're Christians? Give people the spiritual "candy" they want so they can feel so "spiritual" without having to ever even be confronted with the Word of God. Do you want to become unpopular real quick? Preach like Jesus. Preach like the prophets and the apostles. Preach like anyone in the Bible. Frankly, the way of the cross, of suffering and death before glory, is a difficult teaching. The Word is hard to take. Read the Gospels straight through and you won't miss that. That is why the Transfiguration happened. Jesus had just preached the difficult theology of the cross to His disciples. And here, for their benefit, and for our benefit, He now appears in glory. This shows that the cross is not all there is, that there is a glory to come for us – it came for Jesus three days after His death for our sins. It is coming for us to in our own resurrection, but now we cannot always remain on the mountaintop, but must go down to the plain, bearing our cross. And in all this and through all this, if we are to have real Christian peace and joy, we listen to Jesus. That's what the Father told the disciples and that's what he tells us too. Listen to Jesus. Hear His Word. Not ours, not Satan's, not false preachers of glory, but listen to Jesus, to those who preach His Word, the Word of Christ crucified.

Just in time, before Peter could get his glory-based building project underway, a cloud came, the cloud that once filled the temple. It surrounded them. The cloud concealed the glory of Jesus' transfiguration and the Voice of the Father preached from the cloud: *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."* The same Voice was heard speaking from heaven at Jesus' Baptism, identifying Him as the suffering Servant-Son. Again the Father speaks, making it clear to the disciples and also to us, that Jesus is unique and there is none other like Him. He is greater than Moses, greater than Elijah, greater than any religious man, sage, guru, prophet or leader who has ever walked the face of this earth. He alone does the "exodus" of His death and resurrection to save us. He alone has a Baptism that can wash away the stain of sin. He alone can give us His Body and Blood to eat and drink as our Bread and Wine. He alone has the words of eternal life. Moses cannot save you. His words cannot save you. His commandments cannot save you. Elijah cannot save you. Only Jesus.

Peter recalled that mountain top experience many years later when he wrote these words: *"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 ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."* He was an eyewitness. He saw and testified to these things. But as great as the vision was - the glory, the cloud, the Voice, Moses and Elijah - Peter would direct our attention to something more sure - the Word, the prophetic Word that shines like a lamp into the darkened recesses of our hearts.

Glorious visions don't create faith. Visions don't turn the heart. Visions don't forgive sin or raise the dead. A bright shining Jesus may be a spectacular sight, but His Word is what brings you forgiveness, life, and salvation. His Word you have in all its glorious forms - Baptism, Supper, preaching. That's where Jesus is hiding in glory for you, so that on the last day, you may be transfigured. And what a transfiguration day that will be, when Jesus appears in glory with the clouds, and He reaches down to us in the grave, and says, *"Rise, and have no fear."* And, like

Peter, James, and John on the mountain, we look up and see no one except Jesus. In His name,
Amen.