

## Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration, January 21, '24  
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*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. <sup>3</sup> And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup> And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup> He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." <sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." <sup>8</sup> And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. <sup>9</sup> And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."*

The other night, we had some tremendous winds sweeping through Manchester, and I assume they were also sweeping through your own neighborhoods as well. Although, as I don't know where the wind comes from nor where it goes, I can't say for certain whether it was as windy in Chester, IL or in Union, MO, but it was windy here. And the wind woke me up at about 3 am. And as the wind does, it was causing some strange, unidentifiable noises around our house, some that sounded like they were coming from *inside* the house. And I jumped up, and I went to the window to look out. And as I couldn't see the source of the noise, I went to another window and then another. And as I still heard noises, I started exploring the house, tentatively opening doors and turning on lights and looking to see if there was anything amiss.

My mind was racing, jumping to all the types of possibilities that your mind lands on when you hear something go bump in the night. And after concluding that the house was secure, I went back to bed, but only physically, because I couldn't fall asleep. No, by that point, I was laying wide awake, thinking of all the things that could possibly happen to my family in the middle of the night, thinking of my children in their two different rooms, so I jumped up again and made another round of the windows and doors. And it was finally at that point that the thought jumped in my head which should have been my first resource. I decided to pray. And I went back and lay down in bed once more and I started praying. And I kept praying. And I was pleading with God to take care of my family, to keep them safe, to protect my children. And I prayed, and I pleaded, and I begged.

And then a very upsetting realization came to me. I wasn't trusting God, not at all. I trusted that He would hear my prayer, but in that moment I had considered God as only a far-off deity that wasn't nearly as concerned with my family as I was, hence my begging and pleading. And I was ashamed. And I'm still ashamed. Because it was at that moment that I remembered my sermon text for today, the hours that I'd already spent in study, and I realized that I was ignoring what God declared here. I needed the lesson that was given here to Peter and the other disciples, a lesson which you all need to be reminded of as well. That lesson is the answer to the question: **Who Is Jesus?**

That had been the topic of debate six days before this event, which is why our text begins with "*after six days...*" Six days before this, Jesus had asked His disciples, "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" Their reply was that "*some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or*

**one of the prophets.**” Jesus pressed the debate on: **“But who do you say that I am?”** And Peter, acting as spokesman for the disciples gave that great response: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** (cf. Matthew 16:13-16) Jesus is God—that’s what Peter said, and that was the right answer. And then Jesus began to show them why it was that God had come down in human flesh, that **“He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** And that just didn’t square with Peter’s idea of what Jesus as God should be doing. So, he took Jesus aside, needed straighten him out. **“This shall never happen to you.”** And Jesus gave Peter the strongest rebuke He ever gave to one of His disciples: **“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”** (cf. Matthew 16:21-23)

Six days after those conversations, this same Peter was specially selected along with the sons of Zebedee, James and John, to go up on a high mountain and see and hear these truths repeated to them. They were far from the first individuals to whom God gave a glimpse of His glory upon a mountain. Years before this, in fact we read about it last week in our Old Testament reading, Moses had been on a mountain talking with God. That was on Mt. Sinai, and Moses asked to see God’s glory. As you recall, God allowed Moses to see His glory only from the back, as a full-view of the glory of God would have killed him. And so, Moses saw God’s glory as He passed by. (cf. Exodus 33:18-23)

Six-hundred years later, same mountain, different prophet. This time it was Elijah, hiding away at Mt. Sinai afraid for his life, despairing that his whole ministry had come to ruin. God appeared to him there too, revealing his power first in a mighty wind, and then in an earthquake, and then in a fire. And then God made His presence *really* known, shrouding His glory in a still, small voice, using that voice to encourage Elijah to continue on his mission, God had not abandoned him. (cf. 1 Ki. 19:9-18)

Well, here Peter, James, and John are on a mountain with Jesus, and Jesus reveals His glory. But it’s not a veiled glory, instead **“he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”** The other Gospel writers describe it this way: **“His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”** And, **“The appearance of His face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white.”** (Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29) This was Jesus’ full glory as God shining forth, incapable of being fully described in words that we can understand. The Greek word used for **“transfigured”** is the word “metamorphosis,” which is only used to denote a change from one thing to something entirely different (like a caterpillar to a butterfly). Here Jesus is transfigured, metamorphosized from one thing to another, from humble flesh and blood to shining forth with the glory of God Himself.

And if that wasn’t enough to send the message home, **“Behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”** Moses and the prophet Elijah, standing in as representatives of the Old Testament Scriptures which were written by Moses and the Prophets, all of it which speaks about Jesus. Moses, who had declared to the people of old, **“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to Him you shall listen,”** is now there speaking with that One about whom he prophesied. Elijah—who was the forerunner of the forerunner of the Messiah, as John the Baptist is described as the Elijah who was to come (cf. Matthew 11:13-14)—he’s there too! Their post-life presence another clear indicator that Jesus is God in the flesh.

And now, you have to really try to picture this scene. Here is Moses, the one who spoke with God on behalf of Israel, who relayed the Law of God, who died and was buried *personally* by the LORD but whose grave no one has ever found. (cf. Deuteronomy 34:6) With him is the great prophet Elijah, who *never* died, but was snatched right up to heaven in a chariot of fire. And *these* two are talking with the one whose glory and power far surpasses their own. And Peter sees this happening and interrupts!

**“Lord, it is good that we are here.”** He’s right on the money with that first bit. That much was true. It was a very good thing for Peter, James, and John to be there witnessing Jesus in His glory. But then he goes off the rails when he adds, **“If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”** He’s making two mistakes here. The first is that he’s equating Jesus and Moses and Elijah as all being equals. Each one of them was above the task of setting up their own tents, and each were deserving of their own tents, literally their own tabernacles. He sees Jesus shining like the sun, as bright white as lightning, and reduces Him to being just like Moses and Elijah.

And we know the reason for this is that Peter just didn’t know what to say, that’s what Luke indicates for us. Peter is overwhelmed by the glory of God seen in Jesus, and so he minimizes Him. And this is just what many so-called Christian churches do with Jesus. They reduce Him to being a social activist, of being just like them, totally accepting of whatever lifestyle they choose. I read a survey from last year that found that only 50% of American evangelicals believe that Jesus is God. 50%! The other half believing He’s just a great teacher, a great role model for their lives, but not God. They see Jesus’ glory revealed there on the mount and minimize Him to being just like humans. And we do the same, don’t we? I did it the other night, lying awake, pleading with Jesus, trying to impress upon Him that what I want is what is best. And I wanted Jesus to be just like me, to do what I want, to feel what I feel, to learn what I know, to see that my will is actually best. We all do this, don’t we? We reduce Jesus to being less-than-God, as if He’s out-of-the-loop and out-of-touch like we might sometimes be.

The second mistake Peter makes is the implication that they just needed to stay there on the mountain. That’s what tents would be good for, for setting up shop and staying a while. And we don’t know what was going through Peter’s mind as he said this, but it *seems likely* that he’s thinking about the conversation held just six days before, when he learned that Jesus was intent to go to Jerusalem and be arrested and suffer and be killed. Why go through all that? Why go to Jerusalem at all? Here we are enjoying heaven, why not just stay right here, exactly as it is right now on this mountain?

And again, we do the same thing! When presented with suffering and glory—you can miss us with the suffering, just give us the glory. Why can’t everything just stay so good and perfect for us? Why do we need to suffer? Why does God allow bad things to happen to us? And so, when presented with even the *idea* of *potential* suffering, we plead with God to take it away, to never let it happen to us, as I was doing the other night. We want a shortcut, an easy road to glory. We’re just like Peter.

Thankfully, God the Father cuts right through Peter’s words, our misconceptions, our selfish views and God speaks. **“[Peter] was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”** Rather than speaking with a lack of understanding, Peter needed to listen to Jesus who had perfect understanding. Jesus was exactly right when He said that He must go to Jerusalem, and if Peter was to

retain that glory that he saw, it meant that they would *need* to go down the mountain. Jesus would need to return to His state of humiliation to suffer and die. This, and this alone, would enable Peter to become a partaker of unending glory.

And this is what the Savior did, this was His focus even shining in glory on the mountain. We see that His mind was not set on the things of man, on His own well-being, but on the things of God. You see, Moses and Elijah were speaking with Him, and Luke tells us *what* they were talking about. ***“And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”*** (Luke 9:30-31) Jesus knew what He must do, and so He emptied Himself of glory once more. He descended the mountain, He then took the uphill journey to Jerusalem, He knowingly walked into the trap set for Him in the garden. He was arrested, put on trial, yet He opened not His mouth. He was treated scornfully and mocked and ridiculed, and still, God in human flesh offered not *one* word of defense on His own behalf. He was nailed to a cross between two criminals, suffering grave injustice so that He might bring forth justice. And this is what God has done for you, so that *you* might see Him in His glory. And Jesus suffered under your sins, so that you would actually take *part* in His glory shown on the mountain, as Paul writes, ***“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body.”*** (Philippians 3:20-21)

And it is to this one that you are now directed, ***“Listen to Him.”*** But what is He going to say? What would say to *me*? Especially me, if I am willing to stand in this pulpit and direct you to cast your cares upon Jesus because He cares for you and then return to my house and display unending doubts about His love for me—what will I hear Jesus say to *me*? I ought to fall on my face, terrified before a holy God, because I’m a sinner. What would He say to me? He would say to me no less than what He said to His disciples stuck in the same position, ***“Rise, and have no fear.”*** What He was about to do was take away their reason for fear before the Lord, and He’s done the same for me too. He’s done the same for you. He’s forgiven your iniquity, and your sins He remembers no more. (cf. Jeremiah 31:34)

So, if you ever find yourself awake at night, struggling through prayer over what you perceive *could* be a problem, or if, in fact, your problems are not only perceived possibilities but are very real and present in your life—ask yourself the question, ***“Who is Jesus?”*** Remember what we saw on this mountain. Jesus is God—very God of very God, having in Him the full glory of God. Remember next that He took on human flesh to suffer and to die, welcoming the cross and grave in order to save. And the one who loved you enough to take your place still loves you. And He’s still present with you! So, listen to Him! Listen to His Words as He says to you, ***“Rise, and have no fear.”*** Have no fear, because if God was willing to die in your place, He certainly cares for you. (cf. Romans 8:32)

Remember that suffering and glory are not mutually exclusive. Jesus had to go through suffering to attain glory for you, and He now tells you that ***“through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”*** (Acts 14:22) That means we will suffer, but we will not suffer without hope. Not if we listen to Him. Because if we listen to Jesus, if we hear His Word, we will know that God is for us so that we will join Him in His glory. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.