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Matthew 17:1-9

DOES JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION SCARE YOU OR COMFORT YOU?

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Have you ever been thankful to see a certain person at one point in your life but then at another point in your life were scared of him or her? All of us have had that experience. When we were little we could be scared of lightning or thunder or imagined monsters in our closet. We went into our parents' room and Mom and Dad comforted us, telling us that everything would be all right. We felt very good when we heard that. But then there were other times when we were afraid of our parents. We did something really stupid and we knew that we were in trouble. We did not want to see our parents. We wanted to hide, perhaps even run away. At both times in your life they were the same people, but the situation was different. They could be a source of comfort or your sin and shame made you afraid of them.

This morning we will have a mountaintop experience with Peter, James and John. They are going to see something awesome and terrifying. Jesus would give them a glimpse of the glory that he possessed as the very Son of God. The very same picture would be both comforting and frightening. We will conclude the Epiphany season this morning. If there is one thought that we should carry with us out of the Epiphany season into the season of Lent, it is this: Jesus of Nazareth is true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity. If Lent is going to mean anything to us at all, we must be clear as to the person of Jesus. It was not a mere man who was tortured and crucified; it was the very Son of God. The transfiguration is one more proof of Jesus' deity. It is recorded in the Scripture for our comfort and consolation. St. John writes, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing, you may have life in his name."

If Jesus is the very Son of God, that can be both comforting and frightening. DOES JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION SCARE YOU OR COMFORT YOU?

The fact that Jesus isolates three of his disciples is a sign that something very important is going to happen. The Scriptures demanded that two or three witnesses were available to establish the truth. Indeed, St. Peter writes, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." The apostles were witnesses. They saw this event with their eyes. They heard this event with their ears. They would swear to the truthfulness of this event. Peter and James would die martyr's deaths because of their testimony. They would not die for a lie.

The second indication that something very important was going to happen is that Jesus took them up on a high mountain. Big things happened on mountains. Moses went up on Mt. Sinai where he received the Law of God and the Ten Commandments. Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In both instances, the true God needed to be revealed. The Israelites had the false gods of Egypt and the false gods of the nations of Canaan who would try to turn their hearts away from the LORD. The Israelites of Elijah's day would look to the Canaanite fertility god Baal. In each case God would expose the others as frauds and fakes. He would demand that the people have no other gods. God would show himself in glory, fire and lightning.

The transfiguration also takes place to separate Jesus from false gods and false ideas. Just preceding our text, Jesus had taken his disciples to the area of Caesarea Philippi, an area that had shrines to every god imaginable. It was

there that Jesus asked the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The apostles had been with Jesus almost three years. They knew what others were saying about him. The answers were all pretty good. They saw Jesus as a great man, a prophet, a miracle worker, a tremendous man. But was that enough?

Apparently it wasn't because Jesus then turned to the Twelve and said, “But what about you? Who do say I am?” Peter answered for the rest, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus does not tell Peter that he has it all wrong. Rather he says, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because this was not revealed to you by man but rather by my Father in heaven.” And then Jesus tells them what that means. He must go to Jerusalem and he must suffer many things and he must be killed, and he must be raised to life on the third day. He spoke very plainly about this.

The very same Peter now tells Jesus that such a thing must not happen to him. Jesus calls Peter Satan. He tells him that he does not have in mind the things of God, but rather the things of men. The apostles simply did not understand what would have to happen. It would make no sense to them and if we are honest, they would make no sense to us either. We cannot understand the things of God. It is like looking at a jigsaw puzzle and we don't even know what the picture is supposed to look like.

The apostles would see some things six months later that would shake them. Satan would be hard at work trying to lead them away from their Lord. Jesus would fortify their faith with something that they could remember as they faced dangers and opposition and persecution. Jesus takes them up a mountain. There he is transfigured. He doesn't put on a costume or makeup. His appearance changes. St. Matthew tells us that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. It is the same word from which we get the English word metamorphosis as a caterpillar turns into a butterfly.

Jesus is not alone. Moses and Elijah are there with him. The apostles were to see them. We don't know how they recognized them, but they did. This would remind the apostles and us that the soul is eternal. Our bodies will be raised, and they will be changed. Moses and Elijah did not die. They were still living, and they would live eternally. The reason that was so was because Jesus would destroy the power of death forever.

What were Jesus, Moses and Elijah talking about? It was not about the weather or the new baseball season. They were speaking about Jesus' departure that he would accomplish in Jerusalem. Now that sounds absolutely incredible. We don't ordinarily speak about a man accomplishing his own death. If we were talking about an ordinary human being, it would sound like the description of a suicide. But the transfiguration reveals him once again as the eternal God. As he shines with the brightness of the sun, we are reminded that no one can put him to death. No one can take his life from him. He has the authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again.

When the mob showed up in the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, Jesus reminded his disciples that he could call down twelve legions of angels to defend him, if he so chose. His enemies taunted him with the jeer that if he was the Christ, he should come down from the cross. He could have come down from the cross at any time. It was never the nails in his hands and feet that kept him there, but his love for you and for me and for the world, a world that would never accept him for who he was and is and ever will be.

Yes, these same three men would be with our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane where he would wrestle in prayer with his Father, wondering if there was any other way to accomplish the salvation of the human race and resigning himself to his Father's perfect will. He would sweat drops of blood in his agony and resolve to drink the full cup of God's wrath upon sin as he would suffer hell itself so that we might have heaven as God's free gift.

The disciples were afraid and even more so when a cloud appeared and the voice came from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Those are familiar words to the apostles and to us. We began our Epiphany season with the baptism of our Lord at the Jordan River. It was there that this man came to be baptized by John. At that point no one was familiar with him. John the Baptist had repeatedly spoken about the Christ, the Messiah who was to come. And all of a sudden, he was there. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father spoke similar words. Peter, James and John may or may not have been there that day, but John the Baptist spoke of that day. There were plenty of witnesses who saw and heard.

Now we have come full circle. Jesus' ministry is about to come to a close. His work of redemption, his paying the ransom price for our sins was about to begin. It was always about sin. When Moses met the LORD in the burning bush, he was reminded that he was on holy ground. He could not stand in the presence of a holy God. Moses could not see the face of God. He was only allowed to see the backside of God or he would die. Mt. Sinai was a scary and frightening sight with lightning, thunder and thick clouds of smoke. Sin is a barrier between us and God. Peter knew that as well. When Jesus produced a great catch of fish, Peter was reminded of his sinfulness. He told Jesus, "Away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." When Jesus showed his power over death on that Easter Sunday evening by appearing to the apostles in a locked room, they were afraid. They had denied the Lord and run away. But Jesus would announce, "Peace be with you!" and they would be filled with joy.

Peter, James and John were terrified on the mountain. They didn't know what to say or do. They were paralyzed by fear. They saw the glory of God. They heard the voice of God. They knew that they were sinners in the presence of a holy God. The transfiguration of our Lord was a scary thing.

And then it was over. Jesus said to them, "Get up! Don't be afraid!" Moses and Elijah were gone. The cloud was gone. Jesus looked just like they had always known him. They were comforted by Jesus' humble appearance, not his glory. His true glory for us would be found in his willingness to humble himself unto death, even death on a cross. He was willing to suffer the death reserved for the worst of criminals, death by crucifixion. Yet that was not the worst of it. He was willing to suffer hell itself, being forsaken by the same Father who had just called him his beloved Son, so that our debt of sin before God could be removed. The transfiguration would be meaningless if not for the cross to follow.

And so, we now enter the solemn season of Lent. We see the full extent of Jesus' love for us as he walks the way of the cross. We will go to Gethsemane and Golgotha and we will end in a garden where most expected a lifeless corpse. They would not find it. Rather they would find the risen, glorified Jesus who died. May God bless our Lenten journey! AMEN.