

## Scriptures

### Exodus 24:12-18

<sup>12</sup>The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." <sup>13</sup>So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup>To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."

<sup>15</sup>Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. <sup>16</sup>The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. <sup>17</sup>Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. <sup>18</sup>Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

### 2 Peter 1:16-21

<sup>16</sup>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 had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." <sup>18</sup>We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

<sup>19</sup>So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. <sup>20</sup>First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, <sup>21</sup>because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

### Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John 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 dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." <sup>8</sup>And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The season of Lent is a long, slow march to the cross; it is a very somber, serious season. It is a time for self-reflection, for repentance, and for purification through fasting and denial of worldly pleasures, which is why often people will 'give something up' for Lent – as a kind of fast.

At the end of Lent, of course is the glorious celebration of the resurrection – Easter. The darkness of Lent ends with bright light and celebration, but it also begins with bright light and celebration. On this, the last Sunday before Lent begins we also have a glorious celebration of light – the light of Christ as he reveals his divine nature on the mountain top. Welcome to Transfiguration Sunday.

Matthew tells the tale of the transfiguration, and by his account it's a pretty short story. Only a paragraph really. It's almost an offhand comment the way he tells it, sandwiched between Jesus' dark predictions of his upcoming death and the sad tale of the failure of the disciples to cast a demon out of a boy. But make no mistake – this is no casual tale – nor a casual recounting of a curious incident that happened.

This transfiguration moment as Matthew has recorded it, despite its shortness, is massively dense; to the people for whom it was written, who were well versed in scripture, this small narrative spoke volumes.

This is because the story of the transfiguration serves as a nexus of sorts – a grand central station in which many of the people and theme that run through the bible come together. While the transfiguration story is of course about transformation, it is also about continuity and consistency.

Let's get into it.

Six days. Six days later, Matthew writes, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain. This would be six days after Peter made his confession 'you are the messiah' and Jesus revealed himself fully for the first time, telling them that he would suffer and die.

It was six days after God revealed himself on the mountain top in Sinai that Moses took Joshua, the man he had been discipling, up that mountain to be in the presence of God.

Six days of creation, followed by a day of being in the presence of God. After six days, Jesus led three of his disciples up a mountain for a Sabbath day of being in the presence of God.

While they were up there, Jesus was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there also appeared to Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. What were they doing there? And why them? Why not Joseph or Joshua?

We already heard that Moses had a similar mountaintop experience – being in the presence of God with his own disciple. He also had a transfiguration moment as a result of his exposure to the glory of God. We remember that Moses had to wear a veil because every time he returned from his conversations with God his face glowed.

Elijah also shares some characteristics with Moses and Jesus – he also climbed a mountain to be in God's presence – several times. Indeed, after his mountaintop experience with the 450 Baal worshipers it is said that he journeyed to Mount Horeb - one of the mountains Moses climbed to be with God.

Moses parted the waters for God's people with his staff; Elijah parted the waters for God's people with his cloak, and Jesus – well Jesus is in a class of his own so he just walked across the waters.

So, there are many similarities that come together that would suggest why these two appeared on the mountain, but as I said, this is a very dense text so we have to dig deeper to learn more.

## Sermon: Who was really transformed?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Moses represents the law; he was the one who brought the law to the people. Elijah was among the greatest of the prophets – facing down hundreds of pagan priests, and calling down fire on a mountaintop. Moses represents the law, Elijah represents the prophets, the two great traditions of the Israelites. Both of them are present on the mountaintop during the transfiguration testifying to the righteousness of God found in Jesus. These giants of old are pointing the Israelites to Jesus. It is a story of succession and authority.

This story is the passing of the mantle of law, from Moses to Jesus, the passing of the mantle of prophecy from Elijah to Jesus. Jesus is the leader to whom the law and the prophets point – Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah. When Jesus was beginning to gather his disciples, do you remember what Philip ran to tell Nathaniel? ‘We have found him – the one of whom Moses in the law and the prophets also wrote.’ All of these different parts of the Bible come together in this paragraph by Matthew.

It starts making a lot of sense now why even this follows Peter’s revelation that Jesus is the Messiah, and why we close Epiphany, the season of revelation with the Transfiguration – the clearest revelation of the person and nature of Christ that we have.

So, we see somewhat how the transfiguration fits into the grand plan. Now we turn our focus to the event itself – what really happened on that mountaintop?

But was he the only one? Certainly Moses and Elijah were there – the text doesn’t really say if they were also shiny and glowing – we don’t know for sure. But we should ask, who all was transfigured on that mountain top?

We read that Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. This is the Jesus that is often pictured in icons and religious paintings – the halo of light surrounding him and bright white robes. Otherworldly – ethereal.

My question to you this morning is this - Did Jesus suddenly light up and become something he was not? Did Jesus change on that mountaintop before his disciples? Was this a demonstration of some kind where Jesus poured on the power for the benefit of the disciples?

I’m not so sure if that’s the way that it happened. I think it was less a change in Jesus, and more a change in the disciples. Rather than Jesus changing as some sort of show for his followers, it is much more in line with the gospels that it was the disciples who were changed – who were transformed.

Our revelations and encounters with God always change us. It’s not possible to come face to face with God and not be changed. When God steps into our world murderers become great leaders, shepherds

become kings, persecutors become promoters, and enemies become friends. The truth is, we don't change God, God changes us.

I don't really think that Jesus changed up on the mountain. I believe that in his presence the eyes of the disciples were opened so that for the first time they could see Jesus as he had always been from the very beginning – the light of the world.

Likewise, a voice from the cloud said 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' Was this voice of God a new thing? Or were the disciples' ears opened so they could hear that voice that has never ceased speaking from the beginning of creation?

Jesus always was, and always will be God. He was not so much changed in the transfiguration as he was revealed to be who he really was, the Beloved Son of God. The story of the transfiguration seems to be as much about the disciples as it is about Jesus. It's not that the view on the mountaintop changed. The disciples have changed and that changes everything.

I read one preacher who described it as the difference between looking at a picture, and looking through a window.

When the disciples saw Jesus normally, they were looking at a picture, but in this transfiguration moment, they were able to look through the picture and behold the glory of God. They were seeing the matrix; they veil was lifted; they were seeing through the window.

What an amazing experience – being in the presence of God, having the eyes to see and the ears to hear. Blessed are those lucky three! But that was then, and this is now. Is there any relevance at all in this story for us? Can we have an experience like the disciples? The answer is 'yes we can.' But it won't happen to us while we are sitting on our couches.

Like most of the narratives in the bible, this is a story that happens in a particular place and time that has a universal application. Let's figure out the application.

First – the disciples climbed a mountain. This doesn't mean that since they were higher they were closer to God and to heaven, but it is symbolic of placing ourselves in a right place to wait for God.

Mountaintops are not convenient places to be. At the top of a mountain, especially large mountains, there is usually no water. No animals. No plants. No food. The top of a mountain can be a pretty desolate place, a place we don't normally make the effort to get to.

When we journey to the mountaintop we leave behind our comforts – our tv's and tablets, our yoga classes, fitbits – everything. This means that we put our goal of approaching God ahead of everything else. You shall have no other Gods before me. For most of us this will be a significant effort – and perhaps harder than physically climbing a mountain.

But – Moses made the effort. Elijah made the effort. Jesus and his disciples made the effort. We too will have to go out of our way to have this kind of experience, and put some real effort into getting there. Climbing the mountain is a conscious decision to place ourselves in the right place to meet God.

Coming to church this morning is one of those decisions. We come here to meet God - in our worship, and in his word. It's not easy or convenient to come here, especially on chilly mornings like today after the glorious week we had. It's not easy when we have to round up small children and get them dressed and fed in time to get here. It's not easy if it takes a few hours in the morning for the bones and tendons to relax and stretch out enough for us to walk without pain. But - if we make the effort to come here expecting to meet God, we generally will. If we have a seeking heart, we should all be glowing as we leave here today.

We also meet God when we intentionally set time aside for him. When we spend time on our own, reading the Bible, praying, listening and waiting on God – often he will make his presence known to us. We experience his love, his peace. And we glow. We shine.

If we make the effort to put ourselves in the right place and wait on God we look through the picture; we get glimpses through the window. We have our own transfiguration moments, standing face to face with the glory of God. And those moments are incredible. But we can't remain there forever, we can't be like Peter and try to build a shelter to stay in. Remember, there's no food or water on the mountaintop – we can't live there, nor are we supposed to.

Our shining transfigured faces are meant to be a light that we carry into the darkness. The cycle of our Christian life is to spend time in the presence of God, and then spend time out in the world sharing God's light with the people who live in darkness. We move from mountaintop, to the valleys, then back to the mountaintop to be recharged, and back down again into the valleys. Gathering, then scattering. Gathering, then scattering. God breathes into his church, and this is the pattern of how the church breathes into the world.

Our shining is a reflection of the Christlight – the glowing face and clothing of the one who is the light of the world. It is this image of light that we hold in our minds as we enter into Lent, the dark period leading to Jesus' death. The death will be tragic, it will be heartbreaking, it will cut us to our core. Usually on Good Friday, when the cross is covered I actually feel physical pain – it is a very difficult time. But we have received this glimpse of God's glory to hold us and keep us, to encourage us and reassure us. Christ's light will appear to be snuffed out on the cross, but the light of the transfiguration will remain in our hearts – a spark of hope, the light of life deep within us.

In the words of St Peter who was present and had his eyes opened in the transfiguration, 'You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.'

Amen.