

## **Being Transfigured**

March 2, 2014

### **Matthew 17:1-8**

The Christian calendar's season of Christmas and Epiphany officially ends today. We officially shift to the season of Lent starting on Wednesday. It is sort of like we are really done with the partying of Christmas and New Years and it is time to get serious about Jesus. The Super Bowl is over, Mardi Gras will be over, winter is fully engaged, the bills have come from Christmas, and we are starting to at least think about preparing to work on our income taxes. When you put it that way, it does seem pretty depressing. Lent has this dreary, ominous cloud around it – all about suffering and self-denial. We sort of set ourselves up for that kind of attitude when we follow the big-time partying of Mardi Gras with the imposition of ashes the very next day. We are going to talk some more about this in the Ash Wednesday service, but self-denial is anything but somber when we do it in the right spirit, and use the discipline of self-denial to insert Christ into that place. Replacing self-centeredness with Christ-centeredness is an occasion for singing “Joy to the World”, and as you anticipate Lent, think on that.

We are getting ahead of ourselves, though, as I suppose we all tend to do when we are living by the calendar. We see something out there, some occasion or event, a birthday or graduation or wedding or Christmas or Easter, and we get so focused on that time that we miss the time in between. Today, we are going to make sure we don't miss the Transfiguration, and I hope we can get something new from the study of it.

#### **READ Matthew 17:1-8**

I don't know what jumps out at you in this story, but I just think Peter is one of the most interesting characters in all the Bible. You just never quite know what he is going to do or say next. This event follows very closely behind Peter's declaration to Jesus in chapter 16 that “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!”, which was then followed by Peter, in Matthew's words, “rebuking” Jesus for talking about his death and resurrection. In between, Jesus has said that Peter will be the rock on which the church will be built. If Jesus had not known the whole story, He might well have rolled His eyes every time Peter started to say something. Maybe He did anyway.

Here, Peter is a witness to this extraordinary event on the mountain top, and his first reaction is to suggest that they build some shelters. There could have been any number of reasons for that, including a desire to prolong the experience by giving Jesus and Moses and Elijah a place to sit and have a glass of tea. All the Gospel accounts of this event name Moses and Elijah as the other figures without any explanation as to how the disciples knew who they were. But they did know, and understood without question the significance of their presence. That is a reminder to us that all these disciples were first faithful Jews. Here were the very symbols of the Law and the Prophets that were the foundation of their faith and tradition, right there with Jesus.

With Peter's tendency to just start talking, there must have been any number of times in his life when someone shushed him or interrupted him to get him to be quiet. His mother was probably the first. Maybe that has happened to you. It happened to me. But have you ever been interrupted by God? Peter was still talking when God started talking.

What God had to say, if Peter was really listening and not just waiting so he could start talking again, directly challenged Peter. First, God says "This is my Son." Peter's idea about the shelters had Jesus, Moses, and Elijah treated as equals. Not so, God says. Jesus is clearly defined, as He had been at His baptism, and is clearly superior to Moses and Elijah, and by extension superior to the Law and the Prophets.

Then God says "Listen to Him." That is a good thing for all of us to hear, all the time, but it had particular significance for Peter. When Jesus had told the disciples that He would be killed and then resurrected, Peter challenged Him. God's command to LISTEN TO HIM said to Peter – and to us – "You may not always like what you hear, but it is the truth, and you need to pay attention." Later on, Peter is not going to like it when Jesus tells him that he is going to betray Jesus, but it was the truth. Peter is not really going to like it when God reveals to him that the Gospel is for everybody, not just Jewish people, but it was the truth. Whatever God tells us, whatever God reveals to us is the truth, and we need to listen.

We know this event as the Transfiguration because of what the Gospel writers tell us about the appearance of Jesus – that His face shone like the sun and His clothes became as

white as the light. I hope that reminded you of the change in the appearance of Moses after his experience in the presence of God on Mount Sinai that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. The change in the appearance of Jesus has been interpreted as the divinity of Jesus showing through His humanity, and as a hint of His appearance in glory at the second coming. But there is other transfiguration at work here.

The Greek word used for “transfiguration” here is the same root word that we find used by Paul at Romans 12:2 as transformation: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” and at 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory...” It is the same root word from which we get “metamorphosis” – a process for one thing being completely changed into something else. We can see the application of that to us, because our old self has to be destroyed for us to be changed into what God wants us to be, what God calls us to be. We can see that for us to be in the likeness of Christ, we are going to have to be transformed – not polished up or dressed nicer or improved a little; we are going to have to be remade from scratch – we are going to have to be born again.

That is not what happened to Jesus on this mountain. He was already the Son of God before He went up there. I love the way Paul said this to the Philippians: “[Jesus] being in very nature God”, and the way the Gospel of John does it: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God.” So what really happened on this mountain? Who or what was really transfigured or transformed?

Since the nature of God is unchanged from before the beginning of time, and Jesus was – and is – God, the change had to have been in the disciples.

- Jesus was transfigured in their perception of Him. They would never be able to see Him in the same way that they had known Him. They might not have understood what that meant at the time, and maybe that is why Jesus directed them to not tell anybody about the experience. But here was this man they had been following and listening to and watching perform miracles – not anymore just a man. He was the Son of God.

- Jesus was transfigured in their understanding of His place. They may have seen Him as a great teacher or a great prophet, and Peter had declared Him to be the Messiah. But these were very Jewish people, and to have the Law and the Prophets fade into the background behind Jesus was a radical reorientation of all that they believed about the nature of their relationship with God.
- The disciples themselves were transformed from fear to faith. The whole experience had gone very quickly from exhilarating to terrifying when they heard the voice of God. Matthew has us picturing them face-down on the ground, no longer able to even look at the scene in front of them. But while they were in that state, Jesus came to them, and touched them, and told them to “Get up” and to not be afraid. They were transfigured by His touch and by His leadership to get up, and go back down the mountain and get back to work in the ministry that Jesus had called them to.

God means for our experience in His presence to bring about that kind of transformation and transfiguration in us. God means for our experience in His presence to bring us to understanding of who He is. God means for our experience in His presence to bring us to oneness with Him, to right relationship with Him. God means for our experience in His presence to produce a response of faith, not fear.

He lived among us, and lives among us – taught us, and teaches us – worked miracles among us, and works miracles among us – was present with us, and is present with us and in us and around us and among us now. Beginning with the Incarnation of God as the Christ child, we have talked about the miracle of His presence – something that we know without question but have no words to explain. That presence – the presence of the resurrected and living Son of God – transfigures us, transforms us, changes us from the inside out, upside down to make us into what God made us to be – holy and perfectly one with Him.

Open yourself to the experience of His presence, and be transformed. And do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to let go of where you are and who you are, because who God wants you to be and where He wants to take you is out of this world. Jesus comes to you, and touches you, and claims you as His own.