

THIS IS MY SON, LISTEN TO HIM!
Sermon for the Transfiguration, 2020
Matthew 17:1-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel reading read before, Matthew 17:1-9: **After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and his brother John, and led them up onto a high mountain by themselves.** ² **Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.** ³ **Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them and began to talk with Jesus.** ⁴ **Peter reacted by saying to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You wish, I shall make three tents here, one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”**

⁵ **While he was still speaking, a bright cloud suddenly overshadowed them, and a voice out of the cloud said: “This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”**

⁶ **When the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces, and were very afraid.** ⁷ **However, Jesus came and touched them and said, “Get up, and stop being afraid!”**

⁸ **Then they looked up, and saw no one except Jesus.**

⁹ **While they were coming down from the mountain Jesus commanded them, “Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and his brother John, and led them up onto a high mountain by themselves. In a sense, Jesus was leading those three disciples in their climb out of the dark, shadowy plain of their normal existence into a clear and brighter spiritual light, for when they reached the top, they were given, if only for a brief moment, a sneak peek of the glory God contained in the person of Jesus their Lord.

On that mountain, **Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.** ³ **Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them and began to talk with Jesus.** Peter, James, and John were allowed a glimpse of the divinity concealed within Jesus. Furthermore, the now glorified Jesus is standing with Moses and Elijah, two great Old Testament heroes of faith, who spoke with Him about unfolding mysteries that are soon to take place. In his confused excitement, Peter, and what seems to be his desire to extend this majestic moment, interrupts to propose that the disciples build **three tents**, temporary quarters for these three holy VIPs. In his account of this event, St. Luke makes the comment that Peter was so dumbfounded that he didn't understand what he was saying.¹ I'm sure we have all found ourselves like that at times. But as if to head him off, it's while he's still stammering that a yet more overwhelming manifestation of God's glory appears in a cloud that envelops them all. The disciples fall on their faces in fear as they hear the thunderous voice proclaim, **“This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”** Then, as quick as it all started, it's over. Jesus quiets the disciple's fears and directs them to follow Him back down the mountain – commanding them **“Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead!”** Even the other nine disciples were not to know. There was enough selfish desire for pre-eminence among the disciples that they may have regarded this experience as an indication that Jesus had special places in His kingdom for this inner circle of three disciples. It was also very clear that the common people had wrong ideas about the nature of Jesus' kingdom and that they would only misinterpret this event to support their false ideas about that kingdom.

In due time, however, Peter could tell the world in his second epistle, ¹⁶ *“We were not following any clever myths when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and His coming. Rather, with our own eyes we saw His majesty.* ¹⁷ *For He received honour and glory from God the Father when such a voice was spoken to Him by the Sublime Glory, “This is My Son, whom I love and with whom I am well pleased.”* ¹⁸ *We heard this voice, which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain”* (2 Peter 1:16–18).

¹ Luke 9:33

What a remarkable occurrence - a special grace granted to these three disciples! What they saw and heard was beatific, and it naturally follows that there is a lot in this story that we could discuss - think about the deity of Christ, or why it is that Moses and Elijah were the ones who appear, and so on.

Today, we can also use the account of the transfiguration to address what seems to be an ever-present growing trend within the Christian church, a trend and desire to experience something more than we have been given – some kind of highly charged, moving, and spiritual experience like Peter, James, and John had here, something that we feel would confirm or strengthen our faith.

For lots of people, they are drawn to the idea of having some sort of ‘mountaintop’ spiritual experience. They like to think that this may provide some needed proof to settle those uneasy doubts faced from time to time. They think that having a powerful experience would really notch up their level of commitment. They think they would be better servants of Christ if they had one. So this hunger for the supernatural and spectacular causes many to go searching for experiences, looking for some light in the otherwise dark, drab existence that is their lives, so that they can feel the spiritual highs they’ve been craving. Unfortunately, what often happens is that when supposedly seeking the true light of Christ in this way, people get side-tracked and drawn to artificial lights, just like moths that are attracted to a light. Worse still, some of those artificial lights people are drawn to turn out to be the spiritual equivalent of a bug zapper. Remember, the devil can disguise himself as an angel of light² who will constantly direct his attacks upon the church.

So it is that today we find signs and wonders movements within churches. Instead of seeking the Lord where He may be found, in Word and Sacrament, that’s not enough, and so people want to get wrapped up in looking for miracle cures, the gift of what they call ‘speaking in tongues,’ or a direct word of prophecy or vision from God. In more peculiar forms it descends into excesses like ‘holy laughter’ in which at the prompting of a comedian-like preacher the whole congregation spends time laughing uncontrollably; or there’s what they call being ‘slain in the spirit’ when the charismatic preacher thumps people’s heads with the Bible, sending them collapsing into a trance of some kind (I suppose if you thumped them hard enough anyone could do it!). In other Christian faith traditions, the same kind of thing shows up in alleged miracles like crying statues, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, or maybe just her form appearing in a water stain on a leaky church ceiling.

Closely related to this kind of spiritual thrill-seeking is what’s promoted in some circles in the name of having a ‘meaningful worship experience.’ It happens that the right combination of emotional sentiment, excitement, music, and beat will create an atmosphere where people can receive a certain sense of euphoria. This sensation of euphoria is then equated with ‘feeling the presence of God.’ *“I could really feel the Spirit moving among us today,”* they say. Of course, the next service then has to be even more upbeat and exciting to recreate that feeling of God’s presence - and if you don’t feel him... well, I don’t know... maybe He isn’t there.

Another form of looking for a spiritual experience upon which to hang faith is the health and wealth gospel that attracts so many. In it, people are led to believe that the condition of their health and the success they have in business are direct reflections of their spiritual well-being. If you are sick or poor - if you experience bad things - well, then you don’t have enough faith, because God always rewards His best and faithful people in this life with superabundant blessings.

This is a frightful teaching that can really turn out to be one of those spiritual bug zappers for those who are deceived by it. We know from Scripture that God’s faithful people do sometimes suffer from tragedies, or experience poverty and poor health. As a few examples, think of the Old Testament Joseph, along with Job, or the Apostle Paul.

Again, with the pursuit of experiences, think of the desire (and maybe ‘over-willingness’) we Christians sometimes have to analyse events that take place and to interpret them in such a way that we imagine we see the hand of God in operation and thereby suppose that we know what He’s up to. This usually happens in the face of such tragedies, when confronted by destruction and forces that remind us how puny we really are. I guess we can think of the recent bushfires, and now floods that have caused destruction in some parts of the country. These catastrophes make us wonder: *“Where was God in all this? How could He have allowed such a thing to take place? Couldn’t He have prevented it? And if He could have, why didn’t He?”*

In attempting to answer these questions, we see the problem with trying to find God or understand Him in what can be seen and experienced. It’s sort of like trying to know who Thomas Edison was by studying a light bulb. It involves

² 2 Corinthians 11:14

a lot of guesswork, and the answers you end up with usually come more from what you already think than anything you gather from the evidence.

That is why it's always a mistake to try to do our theology and build our faith by so-called spiritual mountaintop experiences. They are unreliable, non-lasting, and subject to too much emotional distortion and interpretation.

No, faith and theology can only be built on the solid bedrock of truth. Jesus Christ is that truth, the cornerstone.³ He is the divine Son of God who has come to save us from our sins regardless of what we see or experience. This was true also for the disciples. The Jesus those three followed up the mountain was from the time of His conception the true God in the flesh. His glorious transfiguration that they were privileged to see did not make it so. Neither did it cause the disciples to believe it, for they had already at this point confessed that they believed Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.⁴ Seeing His glory was only a blessed confirmation of what they *already* believed.

A couple more points should be made. First, those three disciples weren't seeking the experience. It was an unexpected gift given by God's grace. Second, it was not for everyone. Jesus had nine other disciples who also believed Him to be the Christ, but they were not chosen to have this vision of glory. Third, it didn't last. As much as they may have wanted to stay on the mountain and prolong it, Jesus, with His glory concealed again as it was before, led them back down to where the mission of the church was to be done: in the dark, dreary, mundane world from which they had come.

Finally, it didn't make the three disciples who had the experience any more faithful or spiritual. Though they had seen it, when under pressure, Peter still denied that he knew Jesus⁵; and James and John would still selfishly ask for the seats on Jesus' right and left sides in the coming kingdom.⁶

So, what spiritual insight should we draw from this episode in the life of Jesus? We never got to go up on the mountain and see a preview of the Lord's glory, and we see that even having the experience did not prove particularly helpful to those who did. So what's the point? The answer is given by the voice from the cloud: **"This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"**

Jesus is the divine Son of God and our Saviour from sin, even when we don't see and experience wonderful and glorious things. He is completely accessible to us at all times - not to view in visions of glory, but rather to hear us when we pray to Him. The voice of God said, **"Listen to Him!"** We can do that anytime. His Words that are recorded in the Holy Scriptures are the Words that dispels darkness and makes His light shine in our hearts. His Word is the light in the darkness no matter how terrifying or dreary outward circumstances in our lives may be. We are drawn to the Word of Christ to receive His forgiveness, His wisdom, His guidance, and His Holy Spirit who allows us to experience Jesus as our Lord - not to miracles, or to uplifting feelings of enthusiasm, or to successes in business.

Finally, in the words **"This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"** we are also reminded of the words the Father spoke at Jesus' baptism, at the beginning of His public ministry.⁷ Remember then what Paul later wrote, *"Do you not know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? ⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might begin to live a new life. ⁵ If we have been planted together with Him in the likeness of His death, then we shall be planted together with Him also in the likeness of His resurrection"* (Romans 6:3-5).

Being baptised into Jesus' death and resurrection, God's Son, Jesus, is our brother. As our brother, He has left the light on for us - the light we can follow through the darkness until He appears again in glory. Listen to Him; for by listening, we behold His glory. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

³ Ephesians 2:20

⁴ Matthew 16:13-16; Mark 8:29

⁵ Matthew 26:69-74; Mark 14:66-71; Luke 22:54-61; John 18:15-17, 25-27

⁶ Matthew 20-22; Mark 10:35-39

⁷ Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22

PRAYER FOR TRANSFIGURATION

Almighty God, Your ears are always open to the prayers of Your people. Hear now the cries of Your children, as we bring before You our needs of body and soul.

Above all else, we praise You for the precious gift of Your Son. Today in particular we bless You for the message of His transfiguration. Through this mighty sign give to us and all people a clearer vision and a higher knowledge of Christ's person and mission. Give us eyes of faith that see the glory of His deity, and the glory that came through His cross, and lead us to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Grant that, as we continue to see the glory of His person in Your Word and Sacrament, we may know and believe in Him as the Light of the world, the Sun of righteousness, and the visible likeness of Your very being. May we continually hear the voice of Jesus Your prophet still today, that our faith may constantly be renewed. Grant that, as Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in glory, each of us may die in faith, share in the power of Christ's resurrection, and be eventually transformed into ever greater glory.

Let Your Spirit, who inspired the prophets and apostles, live in our poor bodies. Transform our weak, sinful lives so that they shine with goodness, purity, and righteousness. Transform our minds, eyes, judgment, and our whole persons, so that they may reflect the mind of Christ. Take away our sickness, pains, wounds, and hurts. Take away our disappointments, defeats, and despair. Take away our sorrows and grieving. Take away our pride, anger, hatred and fear. Take away our selfishness and envy, our laziness and unconcern for others. Take away all our weaknesses, and turn them by the touch of Jesus into impulses, motives, thoughts, words, and deeds that shine with godliness and new life.

Grant Your blessing to Your church. Especially bless all who belong to the fellowship of this congregation. Be present with all our members and graciously supply what they need.

We pray especially for those amongst us who need a special measure of Your mercy, as they deal with illness, pain or suffering. Be the arms that carry them through their burdens. Grant that we, and all who bear the name of Christ, may daily offer to You acceptable spiritual sacrifices of repentance, thanksgiving, and obedience.

Look mercifully on our state and our nation. Deliver us from those who love evil and whose aim is unrighteousness. Grant that the whole world may know Your will, and all nations may know Your salvation.

Loving Father, as we trust that You are near to us when we call to You, hear our prayer, and grant all our petitions for Christ's sake. Amen.