

TRANSFIGURATION - THE ULTIMATE EPIPHANY

Mark chapter 9, verse 2:

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

Dear Friends in Christ,

With today's service, the Epiphany Season of the Christian Church year draws to a close. Here at Grace we conspicuously and beautifully close out the Epiphany Season with the Farewell to Alleluia at the end of worship. The Epiphany Season is a time of revelation, in fact that's what the word 'epiphany' means. An epiphany is the moment when something is revealed or made clear or made manifest.

Our Scripture lessons during the Epiphany Season have told us about how Jesus was revealed to be the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, first to the Wise Men from the East, the Magi, Gentiles. Next, we heard how Jesus was revealed to a group of fishermen who, in turn, began to follow him, his very own disciples. Last week, in the synagogue of Capernaum, Jesus was revealed by his use of power and by the testimony of an evil spirit to be the Holy One of God.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, the Last Sunday of the Epiphany Season, we will see (and hear) the ultimate revelation, the Ultimate Epiphany, of Jesus as Son of God and Savior of the world.

The Transfiguration of Jesus Is the Ultimate Epiphany

1. Revealed in Appearance,
2. Revealed in Conversation,
3. Revealed in the Cloud.

And it all happened on a mountaintop. Some interesting things happened on top of mountains in the Bible. On Mt. Moriah the Patriarch Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac. On Mt. Sinai God gave Moses the 10 commandments. On Mt. Carmel the Prophet Elijah utterly defeated the prophets of Baal. God has had awesome things happen on top of mountains, so it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus decided to make the Ultimate Epiphany of himself to Peter, James and John on top of a mountain.

1. Revealed in Appearance

"Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain. . ." Peter, James and John are sometimes referred to as the "inner circle" of Jesus' disciples. They were specifically chosen to witness the raising to life of Jairus' daughter in Luke 8. They were the ones Jesus took with him when he went off to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here Jesus specifically chose these three to go up with him on a high mountain. You've heard about Peter, the outspoken one, the impetuous one, the impulsive one. Perhaps Jesus chose him here knowing what would happen later on when he would deny three times that he even knew Christ. The brothers James and John were otherwise known as the "sons of thunder." James was the first of the twelve disciples to die. His brother John was the last of the

twelve to die. They were caught sending their mom to ask Jesus to appoint them to positions of power in Christ's kingdom. All three men seem to have been rather bold disciples, maybe a little proud. If nothing else, this would be a humbling experience for them.

You would think that these three knew something special was going to happen as Jesus took them up on top of a high mountain. But what happened was far beyond anything they could have imagined. On the mountaintop, they were permitted to see an extraordinary sight which they would never forget. Jesus was "transfigured" before them. He began to shine brightly like the sun. He appeared to the disciples as he normally appears in heaven. The Greek word translated as 'transfigured' is "metemorphotha" which means to "change into another form." Mark's explanation of Jesus' metamorphosis is that, *"His clothes became dazzling white . . ."* Matthew writes, *"His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."* (Matthew 17:2 NIV). In Luke 9: 29 we read, *" . . . the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightening."* Obviously the bright light shining from Jesus' transfigured body, was shining through his clothing, giving it the appearance of radiating light.

Throughout history, God has revealed his glory and his holiness in brightness and light. Up to this point in His ministry Jesus had kept his glory hidden, he set aside his glory for the most part. Oh, occasionally he would reveal his power and his glory here on earth by performing miracles: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, causing the paralyzed to walk again, casting out demons, quieting a storm, raising the dead to life. But most of the time he kept his glory hidden. With this transfiguration Jesus was pulling back the curtain, and letting his true divine glory shine. And what an effect this had on the three disciples! Years later the Apostle John wrote, *"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only-Begotten Son, who came from the Father. . ."* (John 1:14 NIV). In his second epistle Peter said, *" . . . we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."* (2 Peter 1:16 NIV). These eyewitnesses had no doubt as to WHO Jesus was. The Ultimate Epiphany revealed that Jesus was not just a pretender. It revealed that Jesus possessed *"all the fullness of the Deity."* (Colossians 2:9 NIV). He is truly God. The disciples needed to see this because, in the near future, they would see this same Jesus arrested, humiliated, beaten and killed. This would help them understand that it was not merely a man, but God himself who was undergoing the torturous execution that Jesus endured.

It fills us with wonder and awe as we hear about this incident when Jesus' glory and majesty revealed him to be the Divine Son of God. We don't need to look inside ourselves to see if our feelings tell us that Jesus is God. Here is objective proof. Here is true glory and holiness. Here is the Divine Savior of the world. Here is our Divine Savior, the God we need to work our salvation.

2. Revealed in Conversation.

That one vision of Christ in all his glory - shouldn't that be enough? But God wasn't done letting the light of Christ shine. Verse 4, *"And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus."* Just think about the message that God was sending by having Moses and Elijah standing there with Jesus. The fact that these two Old Testament heroes of the faith were standing there and talking means they had not ceased to exist when their life on earth ended. There IS life after death! Although Moses and Elijah had left this earth hundreds of years before Jesus was born, they still existed at the time of Christ and they still exist today! They were there on the mountain in their full glory. Therefore, God's promise of life after death is true. And what a comfort that is for those who have lost a loved one in death. Moses and Elijah are proof that what Jesus says is true. *"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."* (John 11:25 NIV).

So what were Moses and Elijah talking about with Jesus? The inspired Evangelist Luke writes, *"They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."* (Luke 9:31 NIV). In their glory, Moses and Elijah knew exactly what Jesus was about to do - to depart from Jerusalem. This is of course a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. So how did Peter respond?

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

While Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his future death to pay for the sins of the world, all Peter could talk about was putting up shelters in which they could all stay. His fear made him sound foolish. When God showed the three disciples his true light, they really weren't able to handle the majesty of the moment. Instead of using his ears and listening to what they were talking about, Peter was caught up with his eyes in the beauty of the moment. He wanted to prolong it. He wanted it to last forever, instead of looking forward to the cross.

This is probably why Jesus still keeps the curtain closed over his glory at the present time, why he presents himself to us hidden under bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, or in the water of baptism, or in the simplicity of his Word. If he really let his glory shine to our eyes through these Means of Grace, we would probably become so enamored with the elements that we would be fixated on them and their glorious beauty we would want the moment to last forever. We might forget about the fact that Jesus came to die on a cross. We might also forget about the mission ahead of us. God tells us to go and make disciples of all nations. This mission can bring ridicule. This mission can bring disgrace. Instead of glory, this mission can even bring death. Yet this is what God encourages us believers to do.

When push comes to shove, God has to keep that curtain closed on his glory. If he didn't, we would be tempted to concentrate only on the glory of God and probably demand to see more and more of it. Very quickly we would shove the cross into a corner, forget about the death of Christ, and only want God to establish a kingdom of heaven here on earth. But that's not the way it works. Jesus, and Moses and Elijah, as glorious as they were at the moment, were only there for a moment, to encourage Jesus on to a far less glorious moment - and yet the brightest moment in the world - his death for the sins of the world on a different mountain, Calvary.

3. Revealed in the Cloud.

The glorious appearance of Jesus and his conversation with Moses and Elijah were actually bearable - maybe not comprehensible - but bearable for the disciples. But the third stage of this transfiguration event just proved to be too much. Verse 7:

Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Matthew tells us:

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:6-8 NIV).

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. The disciples were cowering in fear because of the cloud and the voice. When they opened their eyes the cloud was

gone, the voice was silent, Moses and Elijah were nowhere to be seen and Jesus had stopped shining like the sun.

Why were they cowering in fear? Do you remember how God showed himself in Old Testament times? At the top of Mt. Sinai God made his presence known in a dense cloud with thunder and lightening. God's message was, "Build a barricade around the mountain. Don't even touch the mountain. STAY AWAY. I am HOLY - you are NOT! So when the three disciples saw this cloud, they realized God's presence and glory were descending down upon them. In their sinfulness - it was overwhelming - they couldn't stand to look at it because it was just too glorious, too holy for them. *So they fell face down to the ground, terrified.* (Matthew 17:6 NIV).

When God confronts us with his glory, we have no choice. We are sinful people and he is holy. We possess our sinful nature until the moment of death. When we shed the sinful nature in death, we will be able to witness God in all his glory. Until then, we too would cower in fear in his presence.

So God, seeing the disciples terrified, reverted to the same way he has chosen to work since day one. He spoke to the disciples saying, *"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"* God the Father completed the ULTIMATE EPIPHANY of Christ by telling the disciples that this really was his Son whom He loved. He then pointed them to the Words of Jesus when he said, "Listen to him!"

Wasn't that the most important message for them to hear at this point? Within a short time, they would see Jesus, their Lord and their God, their Savior, they would see him die. The obvious question that would run through their minds is, "Why is God allowing this? If Jesus is the One, why is he dying? What did he do?" The testimony of the Father is clear. Jesus did nothing wrong, I LOVE him. So the disciples would have to come to the conclusion, by faith, that Jesus was dying for what he said he would die for, the sins of the world.

Isn't it kind of ironic that in the midst of these miracles and wonders and visions, God still ends up connecting to his people in the same way he always has, through the Word? Don't we have the same Word that God spoke to these disciples? Isn't that the same Word that works faith? We can handle this Word of God. It shouldn't scare us to hear God say, in his Word, that this is his Son. It assures us that the Savior in whom we trust is the one and only true God. This is important in a time when many scholarly theologians and religious historians tell us that Jesus was just a man, a good man, a godly man, but just a man and not God himself.

Verse 9: *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.* Instead of telling them to go and tell all nations, they could just soak in this moment and not tell anyone. They had time just to dwell on what Jesus was saying, and talk with each other about what "rising from the dead" meant.

We in America are often so worried about doing. What do I need to DO as a Christian? How can I be effective? Sometimes, God just wants us to be still and to listen, to soak things in. The Mount of Transfiguration was one of those times. The disciples were about to go through unbelievably difficult times. They were going to see their teacher crucified and dead. They needed this high point to get them through, this "alone time" with Christ to grow in their faith. They needed to be assured that Jesus was the true light of the world. So here they were, witnesses to the Transfiguration of Jesus, and witnesses

of Moses and Elijah too. There would be time to go and tell others, after Jesus rose from the dead. But for now, God just said to listen. That's what God wants us to do. Listen to Jesus. He speaks to us in his Word. He tells us that, through faith in him, our sins are forgiven and we, too, are God's dear children, on our way to heaven.

The events on the Mount of Transfiguration were the Ultimate Epiphany, the ultimate revelation of Jesus for who he is. True God! The light of the world! It's inspirational to hear him talk to Moses and Elijah about what he came to do, die for the sins of the world. It is reassuring and comforting to hear God the Father express his love for Jesus. But we, too, can't linger on the Mount of Transfiguration any longer. We need to head toward another mountain, Golgotha, and watch Jesus put on the dirtiest covering he could find, your sins and mine. Amen.