

Mystery and Ambiguity

^{CEB} **Matthew 17:1** Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. ² He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. ³ Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. ⁴ Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Lord, it's good that we're here. If you want, I'll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!" ⁶ Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe. 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. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead."

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Today's passage is called The Transfiguration. It's an odd name. It's an odd story. It's unusual. It certainly doesn't fit into our world of cause and effect, of verifiable events and provable facts. The story seems a bit surreal, kind of misty, a bit dream-like, a kind of vision. And so, we're likely to be a little uneasy with this text. At least I've always been a bit uneasy about it and unsure about what it means, and why it's included in the gospels. It seems shrouded in mystery and ambiguity.

Transfiguration seems like one of those fancy two dollar theological words that sometimes get thrown around with no explanation. So, of course, if you don't know what they mean, then you're afraid to ask, because you don't want to sound dumb, and you end up feeling like an outsider or a second class Christian. So I looked up "transfiguration" so we could all be smart together. You learned in school that a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. We call that metamorphosis. In everyday speech we shorten that and say a caterpillar "morphs" into a butterfly. Transfiguration. Metamorphosis. Same-same.

Even without the odd word "transfigured," it's still an odd story. It's an bit of apocalyptic literature. We throw the word apocalyptic around as if it means a big battle between good and evil, but that's not what it really means. Apocalyptic means a revelation, a glimpse into the hidden ways of heaven, a peek at the action of God. And that's what this story in Matthew does.

This passage has some things in common with other Bible stories. Moses and Elijah are the only figures in the Old Testament who spoke with God on Mount Sinai. Both Moses and Elijah were initially rejected by the people but were then vindicated by God. When Moses met with God up on Mount Sinai, God spoke to him out of a cloud. In one account of Moses going up Mount Sinai to meet with God, we are told that three people (Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu (Exodus 24:1 RSV) went with him, just as Peter, James, and John went with Jesus. And it is said that Moses' face shone so brightly that he had to wear a veil.

There's one more parallel that we only see from our post resurrection vantage point. We're told that Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. (II Kings 2:11) At the time of Jesus, many people believed that Moses had also been taken directly into heaven. And from our point in time, we think of the resurrection as a similar event.

Because of all of these connections with Moses and Elijah, we can see this passage as indicating that Jesus is part of the continuous story of what God has promised and given in the Law and the Prophets. Like Moses, Jesus interprets the law. This is obvious when Jesus uses the phrase,

“You have heard it said . . . but I say to you. . .” Like both Moses and Elijah, Jesus confronts the ruling authorities and points out their abuse of the people that they rule.

It’s not unusual to point to the glowing face and clothes of Jesus and see that as the point of the story, the miraculous proof of the divinity of Jesus. But that isn’t the case. As already mentioned, we’re told that Moses’ face glowed brightly and he had to wear a veil to protect others. Jesus is presented not as a non-human, but as transformed, but still human. Peter, James, and John certainly must be dazzled by this vision that they are experiencing. Still, Peter talks to him as a human, not as God! “Lord, how about if I build three shrines for Moses, Elijah, and you?”

It’s at this point that all heaven breaks loose! A bright cloud comes down on them and God says, “This is my Son and I am pleased with all he has done and taught. Listen to him. Obey him!” And filled with awe, now the disciples drop to the ground and hide their faces. They’re hugging the dirt and scared that this might not turn out very well. James and John are probably thinking, “Peter, will you ever learn to shut your face? Do you have to say anything and everything that pops into your head?”

Now here comes the point of the story. Jesus went to these three cowering, quivering disciples and touched them. He said, “Get up and don’t be afraid.” It was a healing touch. Jesus’ hand on their shoulder is nothing less than God’s own touch, and the message is “Rise, and don’t be afraid!”

This vision, as Jesus calls it, certainly affirms the fundamental belief of the early church. Jesus was not just an exceptional human being (great teacher, prophet, and example for others) but also the clear representation of God, the source and judge of all life. But that isn’t the only point.

John Calvin wrote that “In Christ . . . God makes himself little, in order to lower himself to our capacity; and Christ alone calms our consciences that they may dare [to] intimately approach God.” You might say, God speaks in “baby talk” so that we can understand. In compassion for our limited capacity to understand, God came in Jesus, so that we might see, hear, and understand.

God’s power and majesty are surpassed by God’s willingness to set them aside and come to us in Jesus, so that we might clearly see God’s love and gentleness. Only one so great would come to us in a crumb of bread and a sip of wine, which is as much of God as a human hand can hold.

We can’t contain God in a building nor can we escape the light God will shed on our path. We can’t escape from God, Emmanuel among us. God is with us – all the time – in our joy and our sorrow, when we run from God, and when we are mired in hellish circumstances. What a wonderful and reassuring peek at God is given to us in this story. So “get up and do not be afraid.” Amen.