

**Sermon for Feb. 19, 2023**  
**The Last Sunday after the Epiphany year A**

Today we heard two stories about the appearance of God's glory – First to Moses in Exodus, and then to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. In both of these stories, faithful followers of God obey the call to go up onto a mountain and there they experience the awesome power of God's true magnificence.

The interesting thing about the story of the Transfiguration, which we hear in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is that we hear it twice a year – once on the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6 and then on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. The repetition of this event in our liturgical calendar reminds us of how important it truly is.

So – what is God trying to tell us with this story of the Transfiguration?

In Matthew, this event in Chapter 17 happens after the events of the previous chapter, in which Peter declares that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Chapter 16 also contains a section in which Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, and – very importantly – an incident in which the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus to show them a sign from heaven. Jesus refuses to give them a sign but later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up onto a mountain and he gives them a sign that is so stupendous and mind-blowing that there is absolutely no way that it could leave them with any doubt that Jesus is indeed, as Peter said, the Christ – the son of the living God.

Jesus is transfigured before his three disciples and his clothes become dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus to show the fulfillment of the prophecies. Can you imagine being in the presence of that? Even our modern minds, which have witnessed all kinds of fantastical scenes in science fiction and fantasy movies, cannot possibly imagine seeing such a thing in real life.

Peter tries to wrap his mind around it and resorts to the rudimentary human logic of the Ancient Near East, where you made tabernacles and temples where your gods would live.

And then, before anyone can respond to Peter, God interrupts him. It says in the text, “suddenly, a bright cloud overshadowed them.” This is an odd sentence, isn’t it? A bright cloud seems to be a contradiction in terms. We usually think of clouds blocking the light of the sun. Somehow in this scene it overshadowed the group yet was bright – and in every translation of this text I could find the phrase is exactly that – a bright cloud.

Just as in the story of Jesus’ baptism which we heard on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, a voice comes from the bright cloud, and declares God’s message to us: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!” This is all too much for poor Peter, James, and John. They fall to the ground and are overcome by fear. Jesus touches them and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” and they see only Jesus standing there. No more Moses and Elijah, no bright cloud.

So many images of light, and brightness, and illumination of the dark places of the world, are in these stories of Jesus. The story of the transfiguration echoes the events of the Epiphany, in which a bright star illumines the dark sky, and the presentation in which Simeon declares that Jesus is a light to enlighten the nations. God reminds us here that the light of Christ illuminates our dark and confusing world. It gives wisdom and clarity. It provides warmth and comfort in our times of fear. When we are in confusion and anxiety, we can turn to the light of the world to rescue us.

God also tells us in this story who Christ is – “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.” In case we might have missed that information at Jesus’ baptism, it’s reiterated here.

Christ becomes transfigured into his true glory and his face shines like the sun. God also reminds us: “Listen to him.” Listening to God and hearing the wisdom and clarity and hope of Jesus involves tuning out all the things that distract us from God. As we enter the season of Lent next week, we are reminded of this directive: Listen to him. Put away all those things that drown out the voice of God. Discard all those extraneous, noisy, cluttered parts of our souls that come between us and our Creator.

I invite you to take these scriptures from today home with you, and see which parts stand out in your heart and your mind. Meditate on any questions that come up. Ponder phrases like in Exodus “The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire.” There are wonderful phrases in the other scriptures as well, such as in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle of Peter where we

hear “be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place.”

As we meditate on these moments from scripture, we too can encounter the glory and majesty of God. As we prepare ourselves for the holy season of Lent, let us remember to seek the light of Christ in our troubled world and remember God’s words to us, repeated hundreds of times in the Bible: “Do not be afraid.”