

Matthew 17:1-19
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 15, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Sometimes, we may need a reminder that it was God – not man – who inspired the Scriptures; and, while Peter's epistle reminds us that it was the Holy Spirit who carried along ("inspired") the actual *writing* of the Scriptures, those inspired Scriptures do not record a fictional narrative (even if some divinely thought-up fiction), but the historical record. *That's* what I mean when I say we sometimes need a reminder that it was God – not man – who 'inspired', who set into motion, the events of history by which Christ walked the earth, marched to his sacrificial death, rose and ascended on high with the promise to return to vindicate the Church he now sacramentally sustains. *All* is part of that history that *God* inspired. That was *God's* decision of how that would all play out, not man's brainchild.

And we need that reminder sometimes because the events of history, the events that played out in human history, can be amazingly glorious – can sound almost fictional – to read and hear about, let alone – as Peter says – to be eyewitnesses of his majesty when they were with him on the holy mountain.

But, the transfiguration of our Lord, as we meditate upon it today, was just as historically true as it was divinely inspired. So, why would the Majestic Glory (as Peter calls Him) determine that this occasion was necessary to ‘act out’, if you will... what did it accomplish? And why did God make sure it was recorded for all of posterity to hear about and marvel over?

In the church year, it makes a wonderful bookend to the Epiphany season, as it includes a refrain similar to the *other* seasonal bookend (the Baptism of Our Lord) – “This is my son, whom I love.” (“You are my Son...” – the Baptism of Our Lord). But, we should understand that such an appeal to a ‘bookend’ is liturgical... it has more to do with the church year than it does with the Scriptural record itself. And we dare not consign the significance of the Transfiguration to merely the church’s devised year rather than God’s inspired history and written record of that history.

The more complete significance of the Transfiguration may certainly include the idea of making Jesus known (“epiphany”), and it may truly mark the end of a season of sorts, as – from this point on in his ministry – Jesus will set his face to Jerusalem (St Luke records); it’s now time to march to the cross. But the details of the Scriptural account and the broader Scriptures themselves help us understand the more complete significance of the Transfiguration.

For example, the Scriptural record indicates this account occurred “after six days” from the events of the previous chapter.

That “after six days” would indicate this was the seventh day after those events... not that it was the Sabbath day (the seventh day), but – after whatever had happened – this seven days later may theologically indicate the need for, the desire to, *rest* with God. So, what had happened those days earlier? – In the previous chapter, we hear that Peter had boldly confessed Jesus to be the Christ, that Jesus then explained that the Christ’s entire mission and purpose was to suffer and die, Peter had rebuked Jesus for suggesting such things (“Preposterous!”) , and Jesus had responded that disciples of the Christ would not only learn of His salvific cross, but would themselves take up their own crosses and be prepared to lose one’s life in this world rather than forfeit his soul... but, they could do so confidently because (Jesus ends the chapter), “the Son of Man *is* going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father.”

That back-and-forth, we could sympathize, must have been intense. Isn’t *rest* – even temporary resting in God – in order if the future held the way of the cross... not just for Jesus, but for *those who would follow Him*? It could have been easy for them to cheer *him* on and say, “Yes, Jesus, do this for us. This is great! You’re our justification – you die; we live. This is wonderful!” But that’s not how *Jesus* ends his commentary on the way of the Christ. He ties them into it and implies they could even lose their life for the sake of confessing him.

In a sense, you *can* relate. The theology of the cross would be easy for us to cheer on if it simply meant Jesus went to the cross so that we could all live in present glory. What a story *that* would be! But, you know in your own lives that you carry your own crosses (not salvific, but still true and genuine), your own burdens, on account of the world, the devil, even your sinful Old Adam. And, thus, you also know it would be very tempting to put down those crosses, to cease that cross-bearing, to abandon that hope in Christ... if the devil and the world would make those temptations tangible enough... that you could almost taste them! And, thus, you *also* know how much you need the reassurance that the Gospel is not a story contrived by men, but a salvation history (and salvation-future-and-inheritance) inspired by God... And, if you need that reassurance, you can sympathize that after six days, a day of rest with God is needed.

So, Jesus takes the inner three disciples – the eyewitnesses – up to a very high mountain. Matthew’s Jewish readership would have recognized that indicator immediately: in the Old Testament, the holy and majestic God’s dealing with man always happened on mountains. The mountains were the places of the “theophanies” (the “God sightings... God revealing himself to man”)... we especially know Mt Sinai, not only for the giving of the Ten Commandments, but also for the occurrence of our Old Testament account – Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, seventy elders... beholding God, eating and

drinking... yes, a historic record of man dwelling and eating with God – a foreshadowing of the Sacrament itself!

But, there's even more of an intimate face-to-face with God that is demonstrated in that Old Testament reading (which might sound like quite a claim, as you say, "But, Pastor, there's nothing more sacred than the Sacrament!") But, notice the verses after such dining with God... God called Moses further up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain, and God called to Moses out of the cloud, and Moses entered the cloud... the most private communication between the glorious God and his servant, Moses.

In the minds of Matthew's Jewish audience, could anyone rival *Moses*? The Word of the Lord itself claimed that Moses was the greatest of the prophets... no one had ever arisen like Moses since the Lord drew him unto Himself in death and buried him at the foot of Mt Nebo. Who could possibly compare?

Perhaps Elijah! Elijah had also dwelt with God on Mt Sinai (also known as Horeb, 1 Kings 19:8). Yes, Elijah was a fascinating individual, wasn't he? – a prophet unlike the others... not a prophet of words and prophecies to be written on scrolls, like Isaiah (he has no Biblical book bearing his name), but a man of action, calling fire from heaven against the prophets of Baal, even ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot!

Yes, both Moses and Elijah had dwelled with God on the mountaintops in the Old Testament. So, it's fitting that they are seen

dwelling with Jesus: “there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with *him*.” Notice what the Scriptures say: you see, it’s not that Moses and Elijah are to be seen supporting Jesus who is talking with the Majestic Glory. Jesus *is* the divine majesty, and – as they did on Old Testament mountains – here they dwell with and talk with *him*. In short, Moses and Elijah are there to proclaim Jesus to be true God. That’s what all the Law and the prophets were for, is it not? – to proclaim to all who have ears to hear that this coming Messiah was God in the flesh, and we have our salvation, our rest, in Jesus!

Who else but God enfleshed would have his face shine like the sun – Moses’ face shone as a *reflection* of the glory he beheld on the holy mountain, but Jesus’ entire person radiated with glory pouring forth from *himself*! His face shone like the sun, his clothes became white as light.

There is simply no denying what was on full display to give the disciples certain testimony of who this Jesus was that they were following, and thus to give them encouragement, strength as they prepared for the way of the cross.

But, they don’t get it; we don’t get it. All the glorious testimonies – the healing of the crowds, the walking on water, the raising the dead, the transfiguration – and sinners everywhere say, “Meh.” We perhaps join the chorus of Peter – “It’s great that we’re here. We don’t know what it all means, but we love looking at it. Let’s just capture it forever and forget the cross and the way of the

cross!" Isn't that how we would desire to go? We want the gospel to be a promise that God will not suffer, won't lead us into suffering, who won't overcome by suffering. We want a Gospel of "un-suffering." We *love* the theology of glory... not so much the theology of the cross.

So, the *Father* intervenes... and the Jewish readers would have understood this, as the cloud overshadows the mountain. Certainly we recognize the cloud from the Old Testament reading, but even that word *overshadow* is used only two other times in the New Testament – both referring to God touching His people with His presence.

So then, the testimony of God: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

And, the text says, the disciples were terrified. Wouldn't you be? Shouldn't we be? Remember, we're not talking about a religious *story* of God's voice booming from the cloud. As Peter says in his epistle, "we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven"! How terrifying to hear the holy voice of the Majestic Glory in the exposed vulnerability and nakedness of your own sinful self!

No less terrifying *should* it be to consider that coming before the holy God is no less real for you and for me; no less true than for them; no more a religious fairytale before the altar of God than what they knew on the mountain of God: the actual result of God's decision to deal with man. This great truth – that sinners stand

before the holy God (not just “one day will stand” but “daily stand” ... certainly today as you come before the altar, but *daily* before the all-knowing holy God) – has been completely lost on our society. And even in the *worship* of many Christians in our society who claim to believe they recognize they are coming before the holy God, there is simply no appreciation that they stand before the same God who spoke to Peter, James, and John! Fear and trembling has been replaced with fuzzies and feel-good sentimentalities. Reverence that we gather on holy ground has been replaced with auditorium seating and so-called Christian Rock music that jams for Jesus. Yearning for God’s mercy has been replaced with yawning at His holiness.

But the holiness of the Majestic Glory is no lighthearted matter; it’s no religious story; it’s no joke or even empty threat. Repeatedly, our Large Catechism warns, God will not be mocked. The disciples were right to be terrified; and who are we to think we can survive, let alone stand, before the holy God in our naked vulnerability of our sinful self?

So, as they vainly attempted to hide themselves in the dirt, they voice of God seared into their ears: “Listen to Him!” Yes, here’s the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, the *only* individual in all of history that is pleasing to the Father, so *listen to Him!* From that moment on, will the terrified not cling to every single word Jesus says? And so, cling to those words, for as you listen to him, what is the very first thing Jesus says?: “Rise, and stop fearing.”

Remarkable! Jesus says, “Stand up, and do not be afraid of the Majestic Glory.” And why not, but because *He*, Jesus, – God in the flesh – is with them, with you: “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteousness.” Or, as the text says, “They lifted up their eyes” – what does that remind you of, but perhaps that psalm that says, “I lift mine eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord.” And so, they lifted up their eyes *and* (the text says) they saw no one but Jesus only. The beautifully-exclusive safety of hiding in Jesus.

In Jesus, always hiding in Jesus, there is no need to fear the Majestic Glory. This is what the forgiveness of sins is: our sins are covered; are unholiness is not condemned; there is Jesus only – His righteousness, His perfection, His status of ‘the beloved.’ And if *his* status is that of beloved, then – in him – how often do the Scriptures call *you* the beloved? And, if the beloved of God, if even the Divine Majesty *truly loves you* because of Jesus, then you are not only loved from a distance, but intimately cared for and protected by and sustained by God, so that – not only may you rise and be not afraid of God, but thus you may rise and be not afraid of whatever in this life the theology of the cross will ask you to bear and carry this side of eternity.

Go back to why we see Moses and Elijah on the mountain. What else do they have in common, that they point to Jesus? God sustained/strengthened Moses and the children of Israel in

anticipation of the 40 years of wilderness warning; He sustained Elijah who thought he was the only faithful one left (“Kill me quickly; I’m the last one!”); He sustained His disciples in anticipation of the cross becoming very tangible for the Christ and for those who follow him. And He sustains you for the same... you are little different than the wandering Israelites, little different than Elijah in despair over the Church’s present state... little different than the disciples in cross-bearing with certain confidence in the saving cross of Jesus Christ and him crucified. And, as you are no different than all the faithful before you, he sustains you... with His Word: “Rise, and stop fearing.” And with His true presence in humble gifts: “They saw Jesus only.”

That’s the true joy of holy reverence... holy reverence that adorns its worship with the highest customs by which man can confess the majesty of God... but paralleled by true joy, that when you come to the foot of the pulpit, you hear Jesus only. When you come in humble posture to the foot of the holy altar, you receive Jesus only. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” the apostle says... to be sure, there’s still reverence and awe over the holy reality – bearing itself out in history even this morning! – that what we partake in is no mere religious story, but the true holy things of God! – yes, reverence and awe, but no fear of condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And, safe in Him and the salvation of His cross, we may take up our crosses, and our burdens, and our daily life in this broken world, and follow him... fixing our faces to the New Jerusalem and the promises that await us, the true glory of which the apostles spoke freely and boldly after Christ had finished his saving course and been raised from the dead.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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