

*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.<sup>3</sup> His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.<sup>4</sup> And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”<sup>8</sup> Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.<sup>9</sup> 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. (Mark 9:2-9)*

### **What does the Transfiguration Show Us?**

In our gospel lesson for today, we have a famous event. It’s called the Transfiguration. Children in Sunday school and in our parochial school hear it at least every other year. But when I was a child, I always thought that it was a strange story. Jesus went up on to a high mountain and he was transformed. His face and his clothes became dazzling white. My dad did some professional photography. He had these blinding lights and I always pictured them when I heard this story. Then Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus and a cloud covered the disciples and God the Father spoke to them. Now, I never doubted that all this happened. But I always wondered why. As a child I could understand most of the miracle stories. The healings made sense. Someone was sick and suffering, and Jesus took the pain away. Even when that person was dead or possessed by a demon, it made sense to me that Jesus solved those problems. And he fed thousands when they were hungry. He even turned water into wine when a couple ran short. But this is different. There was no obvious need that he was fulfilling. Why did he do this? And why did God record it – three separate times – so that every generation of Christians would hear about it? **What does the Transfiguration show us?**

#### **I.**

**The Son of God who hid his glory.** Now, that part did not confuse me as a child. All our lives, we Christians have heard that Jesus is the Son of God. But the disciples had a different experience. They didn’t grow up hearing that Jesus was the Son of God. They did know it was true. In fact, about a week before this, Peter had confessed that Jesus was “the Son of the living God.” But it was easy for them to forget that. You see, for three years, they spent every day with Jesus. They walked with him and talked with him. They ate with him and often slept a few feet from him. He looked and sounded and even felt like the real human being that he was. It was hard for them to keep in mind how much more he was.

Are we really any different? Sure, we know Jesus is the Son of God. But how often in our own lives don’t we forget the deep spiritual truths that we’ve been taught? We know that God promises to love and care for us in all that happens to us. Yet, how often don’t we live and act as if we had to solve our problems and we don’t even think to pray about them until they reach a crisis point? How often do we let Scripture tell us what actions we should take and even what attitudes we should have? How often do we simply parrot the attitudes of the people around us? We usually know better, but it’s easy for us sinners to lose sight of what we know. And if we haven’t been rigorous in maintaining our knowledge of the truth, if we haven’t been to a Bible class since we were confirmed, if we haven’t studied the word of God in our adult life other than to sit passively in church and absorb what we can, can we even claim to know the things that we once were taught?

It’s a miracle of God’s grace that any of us knows who Jesus is. And we need him to keep doing that miracle or our sinful hearts will gradually revert to unbelief. We are either growing or retreating in our faith. Jesus knew that was true for his disciples, too. So he took action. This was a highly significant moment for him to do that, because he was at the great turning point in his life. Jesus was way up north in Galilee, but when he came down that mountain, he began his final trip to Jerusalem. Now many things were going to happen before he got there. But Jesus was going to Jerusalem to die. And he knew that Peter, James and John were going to have to live through his passion. He knew their faith was going to be challenged like never before.

We are about to begin Lent. We’re going hear all about Jesus dying again. But we will always know how the story ends. The disciples had to live through his arrest and execution. Before it all began, Jesus

wanted them to see the truth: the Son of God was going to the cross, not because he had to, but because he chose to. When he was arrested, when he was dripping with blood from a crown of thorns and scourging and beatings, when he was nailed to a cross and dying the most humiliating death the ancient world knew, while his enemies mocked him and told him to come down from the cross if he really was the Son of God – while all that was going on, it was hard to see his glory.

But it wasn't because that glory had been taken away or because he wasn't strong enough to keep all this from happening. They couldn't see the glory because Jesus himself hid it. He laid aside the full and constant use of his power and glory as God and he went to Jerusalem and he let them convict him in a kangaroo court and torture him and finally nail him to that cross. All those things happened because the Son of God wanted them to. And before they began, in love he reached out to his disciples and showed them who he really was. He worked to sustain their faith.

And he does the same for us. His glory is still hidden in this world. We don't get to stand with the Peter, James and John on the mountain and see his clothing turn whiter than anyone could bleach them or his face shine like the sun. We only get to hear about that event through his word. Jesus still hides his glory in the Bible. Too often, that glory seems like nothing. Too often, sermons and Bible class seem like boring repetitions of things we've heard before. Why would we bother to come to church every week? Why would we add another hour and go to adult Bible class? What could possibly make that worth our time? Too often, we see only the human side of the ministry, just as the apostles could only see the human side Christ. We see pastors that we don't really like all that much. We see teachers who have an agenda we don't understand. We hear music that sounds old fashioned and that's hard to sing and we don't understand why we can't sing songs that are more fun. We see what looks like the same old message, week after week and year after year.

But Jesus hides his glory in that message. Because our real problem is not the message, it's our hearts. God holds out to us the precious message of eternal life. But our hearts are sinful and we actually treat it like nothing. For that sin, we all deserve to spend eternity in hell. But Jesus hid his glory and went to that cross and died for the hardness and sin in our hearts. He died because we don't care enough about what God says. He died because all too often, we aren't willing to put in the work it takes to search the scriptures and find his glory. He died because it's so easy for us to forget that God built his Spirit into these words and he himself reaches into our hearts through them. Jesus died for all that sin. And he rose and announced that we are forgiven. That message is the Son of God's greatest glory.

## II.

We see the importance of what Jesus did in the reactions of the three men who were with him: they were terrified. James and John did what most people do when they're that scared – they just froze and said nothing. Peter did what came natural to him – he started talking. He made that silly suggestion of setting up tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah and he didn't stop talking until God the Father came and announced his presence by reminding them who Jesus really was. They didn't stop being afraid until they looked up and all they saw was the familiar “old” Jesus – the one who hid his glory, the one they were used to seeing and following. The Lord wasn't surprised by terror. It was exactly what he came to deal with. **What does the Transfiguration show us? The Son of God who ended our fear.**

Why were they so afraid? Was it the obvious display of power? Was it the unknown and what was about to happen? Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. They saw dead people. Were they terrified of ghosts? Then this mysterious cloud appeared and it enveloped them. God the Father spoke from the cloud. Were they afraid that something bad was hidden in the cloud? Were they afraid because the voice was so loud? No. None of those things is the reason why they were afraid. Their fear came from a much more fundamental place: their sin. They saw Jesus as the true Son of God. In his glory, they saw his holiness. They saw two men who were free from sin and now live holy and glorious lives in heaven. And in that cloud, they saw the Glory of the Lord, the visible manifestation of God's presence.

Peter, James and John were sinners. Sinners are always terrified in the presence of a holy God. That theme runs through all of Scriptures. Again and again, when God, or even an angel appears, he has to say, “Don't be afraid!” These disciples were believers. They had very incomplete understanding at this moment, but they did trust in Jesus as their Savior. Still they were terrified. My friends, if Jesus came down and appeared to us in his glory today, we would react in exactly the same way.

Why? Because we're still sinners. We like to think of ourselves as good people. When we have problems with people, we usually figure it's the other person's fault. When we talk about our sin, our default setting is that other people are always worse. We should know better, because we're Christians, but again and again, I hear people say that they're going to heaven because they're good people. But when a sinner stands next to the Son of God, he can't lie to himself anymore. He can't help but see how filthy and sinful he is. And he can't help but feel terror – terror that God is going to give him exactly what he deserves, terror of death and hell. If Peter, James and John – three of the apostles, men who dedicated their lives to serving God – felt terror in the presence of the Son of God, do you think that we would do any better? We are sinners. We are egotists by birth. Even today, we would be terrified in Christ's presence.

That's exactly why Jesus hid his glory. He came in humility to take up our hurts and carry our sins and sorrows and even our fears to set us free. He came to his disciples in a form that wasn't terrifying. He hid his glory again and came in that old familiar form. He does not appear to us in clouds and light and terror today. But in his word. In communion. In baptism. He comes gently and humbly to our fragile and shaky hearts and he gives us peace and rest.

To do that, he had to hide that glory. If Jesus had revealed his glory in Jerusalem, would any Roman soldier have dared to drive nails through his hands or feet? Would they have dared to scourge him or mock him or put a crown of thorns on his head? Would any Jewish leader have dared to accuse him? Would Pilate have dared to condemn him? No. They would have been just as terrified as Peter, James and John were. They would have run away or fallen on their faces and sobbed in terror. And Jesus would not have died. And our sin would not be paid for. And when we had to appear before God for judgment, we would indeed have cause for real terror because we would be doomed to hell.

So Jesus hid his glory to die for you and for me and for the entire world. He died and paid for that pride in us that refuses to see our sin. Because he did, everything is different for us. Now, when we see Jesus in his glory – when we die or when he comes back – we won't be afraid because we won't be sinners anymore. At that moment, Jesus will strip away all the sin in our hearts. We will rejoice to see our Savior. And we will live in his presence forever, glad to see his face every single day.

This past week, I visited one of our members who lives in a nursing home. She's become quite confused and often her conversation doesn't make much sense. I read this gospel lesson to her. As soon as I was done, she said, "The Transfiguration!" I could only smile in surprise and tell her she was right. Jesus hides his glory in these simple words that we have heard over and over again. He reached through the fog and confusion of her mind and showed that woman her Savior, the Son of God. That's who we see today. And one day soon, we will see him in all his glory and we will rejoice. Amen.