

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown 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.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” (Matthew 17:1-9)

Can You Tell What’s Real?

I started my ministry in Colombia, in South America. Colombia is famous for its coffee. But did you know that it’s also the world’s biggest supplier of emeralds? Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean that we came back to the United States with pockets full of emeralds that we bought cheap there and sold for a profit here. It really doesn’t work that way. But many Americans think that it does. Now, I do remember one time when a stranger offered to sell me an emerald cheap. This stone was huge. It was dark green and clear. It was beautiful. But I didn’t buy it because I don’t know anything about emeralds. I wouldn’t even know if it was real or not. To convince myself that I didn’t walk away from a deal that would’ve put my kids through college, I always maintain in my mind that it was just a piece of green glass. But what if it wasn’t? I could’ve made a lot of money. But I just didn’t know. As nice as it might be to make a quick killing by reselling an emerald, spiritually speaking, knowing what’s real is the difference between heaven and hell. This morning, we’re studying a moment in which Jesus showed his disciples what was real and what wasn’t. **Can you tell what’s real?**

I.

You’ve all heard the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. Transfiguration simply means that Jesus changed the way he looked. He did that to teach his disciples to pay attention to more than just appearances. When it comes to our faith, **can you tell what’s real? Can you see the real Jesus?**

Most of the people of Jesus’ day couldn’t. They could see his physical body. They could hear him and touch him. They had all kinds of ideas about him. But the vast majority of them didn’t understand who he really was. Jesus didn’t want his disciples to make the same mistake. So he took them up onto a high mountain to reveal himself to them. Matthew tells us, **“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”** Jesus was blazing in the darkness. He showed his disciples a glimpse of his glory as God. Again and again, the Bible associates God with light. St. Paul says that God lives in unapproachable light. In the Old Testament, when Moses came out of God’s presence, his face shone with God’s light and he had to wear a veil until the light faded. In this moment, God showed Peter, James and John who Jesus really was: the Son of God. Now, for two thousand years, the Christian Church has wrestled with that truth. But we all confess it: Jesus is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is fully God and he is fully human. We may have some questions about this point, but in general, I don’t worry that we won’t confess it.

In the lesson, Peter saw Jesus transformed. Then he saw two men who had been dead for centuries appear and talk to him – Moses and Elijah. How did he respond? He said, **“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”** What was he thinking? Keep in mind that Peter often engaged his mouth ahead of his brain. Luke says he was so scared he didn’t know what he was saying. You have to think that part of that fear and confusion was the recognition that this was different. For this brief moment, he was seeing Jesus in all his glory, accompanied by saints from heaven. His suggestion betrays a desire to hang on to that. Peter didn’t want to lose this little taste of heaven. So he suggested putting up their shelters – think of tents in modern terms – to stay there.

Can we blame him? Wouldn't we want to hang on to that? And wouldn't we be afraid, too? The glory of God always terrifies sinners because they can feel his holiness in that glory. They can feel his willingness and his power to judge and condemn sinners. If we were to see the glory of Christ, wouldn't we be just as scared and just as stupid as Peter was? The truth is, when it comes to God, we also struggle with our human stupidity. Maybe we wouldn't suggest a camping trip with Moses and Elijah, but we still shoot off our mouths and talk about things we don't understand. We still wrestle with who God is and what he has done.

Today, our struggles have a lot more to do with our minds and what we can accept. The American mind today believes that God has to be comprehensible. God has to be subject to what I can understand and what I can figure out. For several weeks, I've had a running discussion in my public school confirmation class about what it means that God is eternal. God has no beginning and no ending. Some of the kids say over and over again, "God had to start somewhere." No he didn't. But I can understand why it's hard for them, because everything that we know started somewhere.

But God is completely beyond our experience. We cannot understand him. When an ant is crossing your kitchen floor, following the trail of pheromones that lead to your garbage container or your sugar bowl, and you enter the room, most of the time, the ant keeps on doing what it's doing. Its tiny brain simply cannot comprehend that you might not like having insects in your kitchen. It never even occurs to the ant that you might stomp on it or spray it and all the ants behind it with bug spray. Bug spray is not something an ant can comprehend. But that does not change what bug spray is or what it does. The fact that our puny human minds cannot wrap themselves around the idea that God has no beginning or ending doesn't make that idea false. It makes it something we have to accept by faith.

But we Americans want to fit God into a tent on the mountain that we can understand. We want to pigeonhole God in our definitions and categories. We want God to make sense to us. And when God defies us, when our pastor dares to say things that we don't like or that don't make sense to us, that scares us. It threatens to reduce us to tiny little men and women who have no control over our own lives and who are totally dependant on God. Ding! Ding! Ding! That's what we are. But we don't like it.

So we revolt. We say things like, "That's OK for pastor to say, but it doesn't make sense," or "I don't believe that," or "Whatever." We act in a stupid and sinful fashion just like Peter did. Did you notice how God dealt with Peter? He didn't say, "That's OK, Peter. I know this is hard." Instead, a cloud approached them – a cloud that was "bright" in the middle of the night. God was in the cloud and the disciples were terrified as it came over them. Then God said **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"** You can only take this as a rebuke: "Shut up and listen to my Son." That is still God's answer to us, 20 centuries later, when we think that we know more than God does and when we think that what God says doesn't make sense or doesn't apply today. God says, "This is my Son. Shut up and listen to him."

Those disciples fell on their faces in terror. They understood that God was speaking to them and to their sin. Do we? Do we even have the good sense to fall to our knees when we've been blaspheming God and demanding that he be what we want him to be? Those disciples fell on their faces because they could feel the power of God to send them to hell. But we Americans have gotten over our fear of hell. We don't really think God is going to punish us. And if he dared to, what a lousy God that would make him!

Are you afraid yet? Are you uncomfortable because you know that your sinful heart keeps trying to put itself in God's place? Notice what happened next: Jesus touched his disciples and he said, **"Don't be afraid."** With those simple words, Jesus put himself in between the disciples and God's wrath. Jesus puts himself between us and God's wrath, too. We don't need to be afraid anymore. Yes, we have been guilty, over and over again of trying to reduce God to our level. Yes, we have demanded that God make sense to us. Yes, we deserve God's punishment in hell. But even though that's all true, we still have Jesus. He still stands between us and what we deserve. He still saves us and forgives us and makes us holy in God's sight. Jesus is God. He gave his life to pay for our sins. That all-powerful Jesus loves us. He will lift us up higher than any mountain to live with him forever. That Jesus tells us, "Don't be afraid." No matter how great our sins have been, Jesus is greater. And he has taken our sin away.

II.

That's why he came here. To understand Jesus, you have to understand who he is: the Son of God come in human flesh. But you also have to understand why he came. Jesus was more than a great example of love. He didn't come here to show us a new way of living. He came here to give us a new life. Jesus didn't come

here to make us feel more guilty because we don't live up to his level. He came to take all our guilt away. **Can you see what's really true? Do you know Jesus' real mission?**

On the mountain, Jesus bent down over those terrified disciples and touched them. He did the most natural thing to comfort them. When he told them not to be afraid, he really gave them forgiveness. Now, they didn't understand all that theologically yet. But the only thing that can take away the fear of sin is forgiveness. This was the Savior bending down over them. He took away the wrath of God. When they opened their eyes, the cloud was gone, the glory was gone, the dead were gone. Above all else, the voice was gone. All that was left was their Jesus who makes everything right with God. That's true for us, too. When we stand before God and we feel guilty because we haven't accepted his words the way we should, because we're full of stubborn pride, at that moment, Jesus takes away everything else and he lets us see only him, being perfect in our place. Only him dying and rising and telling us that we don't have to be afraid of God's anger, because he took all that anger away.

This is was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. From here on out, the gospels all begin to tell the story of how Jesus went to Jerusalem and died. Now, that death did not take place immediately. Jesus was so far north that he was almost out of Israel when he said this and Jerusalem was a long way away. Jesus did not take a direct route to Jerusalem. He wandered and taught and backtracked. But from this time forward, every step was a step toward the cross. Every word prepared his disciples for that day. Every action carried him closer to the final act of his life: paying for our sin and then rising so that we stand forgiven. That was the reason he came. Dying and rising were his true mission. And why? So that we can stand where Moses and Elijah and Peter and James and John all stand today. They live in heaven because they trusted in what Jesus came here to do. Jesus came down from that mountain and went to Jerusalem to die and rise so that we, twenty centuries later, have the hope of joining him in heaven. A hope that will not be disappointed.

Jesus said, **"Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."** What a surprising request! Wouldn't you think Jesus would want everyone to know? Why did he say this? Well, what would've happened if the Roman soldiers had seen Jesus' glory? Do you think they would've dared to drive nails through his hands? Do you think they could have whipped him or mocked him while they were cowering in fear? Do you think that Pilate would've sentenced him to death? If the crowds had even known what the disciples had seen, do you think they would've shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" on Good Friday? All those things had to happen. Jesus told them to be silent because he had to complete his real mission and die and rise for us.

But the silence was only temporary. Once he rose, they were to proclaim this incident and what it meant. To be honest, they didn't understand what it meant yet – which is another good reason for them to be quiet. But Jesus' mission to win eternal life includes the mission to proclaim eternal life to everyone on earth. Only that gospel message has the power to overcome our unbelief and our struggles with the mystery of God. Only that gospel message can lead us all to trust in his forgiveness and to humble our minds and our hearts before him. Only that gospel message can show us the true and real Savoir. On the mount of Transfiguration, we see the real Jesus. We know his real mission. That, my friends, is the truest thing that we can ever find. Can you tell what's real? Jesus is real. Amen.