

“Super Sunday”

TRANSFIGURATION Sunday

February 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”



As we stand on the edge of Lent, we jump from three weeks of learning what the community of faith is called to be and about how it is to function. Today, we shift gears today.

Radically. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Today we see and celebrate not the physical, human side of Jesus, but the divine and glorious aspect of Jesus. As we do so, let us pray...

On the mountaintop with three of the disciples, Jesus is revealed in glory. Today is not about knowledge. Today we shift our focus. Today we will focus on our faith. Today we join the disciples, bowing in praise and adoration. We celebrate who Christ is.

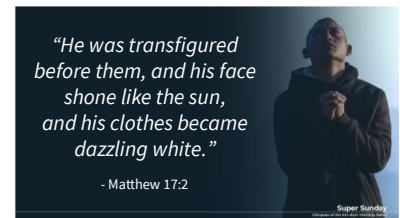
Today's message is "Super Sunday." In our world, maybe that would have been a better title for last Sunday. There was a pretty big football game last Sunday. I like to watch the Super Bowl. If it doesn't involve the Vikings, which it usually does not, then I just hope for a good game. This year's was great. I was pulling a little bit for the Eagles because I know Bob is a huge fan. Sorry Bob.

The Super Bowl is an event that gets a lot of hype and lots of airtime. Pregame started at about 10 this year. Not to mention the two weeks leading up to the big game. Let's just admit that it might be a bit much. It seems excessive. It is a football game after all. Contrast that hype to the type of life that we are to live. We're not supposed to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing. We're supposed to pray in private. We're not to boast about or parade our faith around. We want to be more like the guy in the slide image for this Sunday. Maybe that is why Transfiguration Sunday seems to run a little bit against who we try to be as people of faith.

Please turn with me to Matthew 17. The passage begins with, "*Six days later...*" Something happened before going up the mountain. A quick summary! Towards the end of chapter 16 Peter declares that Jesus "*is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" Then, as Jesus tells the disciples about his imminent death, Peter rebukes Jesus, saying, "*God, forbid it Lord!*" Peter then hears these words: "*Get behind me Satan.*"

As the chapter winds down, Jesus goes on to explain that following him calls for one to deny self and to pick up their own cross, losing their old life for the sake of following the Christ. It is six days later that Jesus take Peter, James, and John up the mountain. These three were the inner circle of the disciples. The same three will be invited to go a little deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Jesus in his time of great need.

Once at the top of the mountain, it happens. In verse 2 we read, *“He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”* This is



Matthew’s description. Mark describes the dazzling white clothes as *“such that no one on earth could bleach them.”* We read that Jesus’ face *“shown like the sun.”* In both of these descriptions we must realize that human beings are trying to describe something that no one has ever seen before. This is like Daniel or Jeremiah or John trying to describe their visions of heaven. Human words always fall short. But there, in that moment, Jesus’ appearance changed as he was transfigured into the divine. Imagine being there, standing in James’ or John’s or Peter’s shoes. Imagine just for a second how your heart would race, how your knees would buckle.

Perhaps the first thing that came to their minds was this thought: Who is this? The man who they have been following suddenly looks nothing like the man Jesus. Maybe their minds went back to stories told by the shepherds, by the ones who were visited by a host of angels singing praises to God. Maybe their thoughts turned to Daniel’s prophecy, where he describes *“the ancient one”* in chapter 7.

In verse 9 Daniel writes, *“his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.”* These words, whether from Matthew or from Daniel, conjure up an image in our minds. They are helpful to that degree. But I believe that when we get there, when we see Christ on the throne, we’ll recall these words and think, “I can see that... but it is so much more.” In that moment, though, Peter, James, and John clearly knew that they were in the presence of the divine. In this moment, they saw the full reality of what it meant that Jesus was the Son of the living God. That is whose presence they were in.

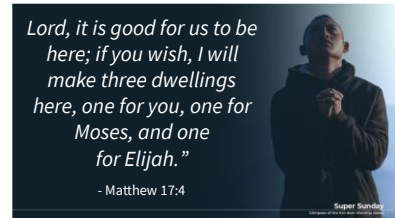
Just as quickly as Jesus is transfigured, Super Sunday takes it up a notch. We read in verse 3 that Moses and Elijah appeared and began to talk with Jesus. I wonder how the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah. Was Moses carrying the Ten Commandments in his hands? Was Elijah in the chariot of fire? And maybe they learned later, from Jesus, as they quizzed him about what they just witnessed as they hiked back down the mountain. Well, come to think of it, I bet that was a real quiet walk back down the mountain. Lots to think about, for both Jesus and for Peter, James, and John.



In the moment, though, as Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah, there was clearly something going on. Moses represents the Law. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery and to the brink of the Promised Land. Elijah represents all of the prophets who have come to the people of God, all who came to draw them back again and again into right relationship with the Lord. As these most revered men of the Jewish faith talk with Jesus, he is preparing himself for the final walk to Jerusalem.

Moses and Elijah have a word for Jesus. There is a sense that the final push is about to be under way. As Moses and Elijah converse with Jesus, Peter interrupts.

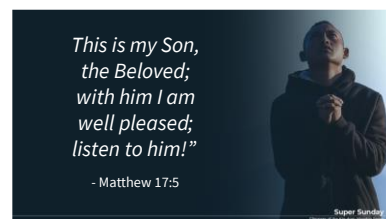
Peter says to Jesus, *“Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”* Peter recognizes the significance



of this moment. Some scholars believe that Peter was trying to stake his claim, trying to second his earlier confession of Jesus as the Messiah, by setting up a tent to preserve or contain this scene of glory. I have a hard time with this line of thought. Yes, Peter was the speak-first, think later type. He was the one to step out of the boat, the one to draw his sword to defend Jesus in the garden. There is a bit of that here in Peter's outburst. But in that moment, in the presence of divine glory, in a place where words certainly failed, how could Peter think about anything else other than to worship, to celebrate what was unfolding before his eyes? Think for a moment about what that must have been like and felt like to be there on the mountaintop. In the presence of the transfigured Christ, how could ones' thoughts turn selfish?

But realistically speaking, there is a problem with trying to set up a dwelling place. How could one possibly seek to contain the glory of God? Yet that was Peter's experience. That is what the Jews believed about the temple. It was the place that contained the presence of God. It was the place where God's glory dwelled. So with this background in mind, it is a logical thing for Peter to think about. And then God interrupts. God refocuses the scene.

Speaking from a bright cloud that suddenly overshadowed them – think something even brighter than something so bright you can't really describe it. God says, *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"* There are three parts to this statement. First, *"This is my Son."* This is a statement of relationship. This person, this one transfigured before you, this is also God in the flesh, the divine come to earth. Second, Jesus is *"the Beloved."* This is a declaration of God's love for Jesus. It is a father declaring his love for his only son. The third part is also a declaration. And it is partly a command: *"Listen to him!"* Pay attention to his words, spoken and unspoken. Listen to his teachings, to his understanding of the Law, to how he applies the law to our lives.



And also listen to his example. These are his unspoken words. Watch and learn how Jesus treats the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector. See and learn how Jesus interacts with the sinners, the outcasts, the marginalized. Hear the words of love and compassion and mercy that Jesus speaks with his actions.

God's voice coming from the cloud frightens the disciples. Overcome with fear, Peter, James, and John fall to the ground. It is then that the once again human Jesus touches them, calling them back to reality as they knew it. He simply says, *"Get up and do not be afraid."* Looking up, Peter, James, and John realize that it is once again just them and Jesus, their friend. Super Sunday was over.

Welcome back. As they make their way down the mountain, Jesus tells them to keep this little experience to themselves for a while – until he has been raised in glory.



Peter, James, and John would do this, at least in public. In 2nd Peter, years later, he shares what was revealed to him on the mountaintop. Imagine with me how this mountaintop experience would have changed how these three saw Jesus from then on. Their worship and adoration and reverence must have risen to a new level.

The same thing happens to you and to me when we encounter the divine in our lives. Maybe one of your encounters happened on a Sunday morning or maybe it was when you were at church camp. Or maybe it happened when you were in the depths of grief or despair or maybe it was when you were in the heights of your own mountaintop experience. Wherever or whenever or however we encounter the divine, our first reaction is often to worship. That may be with arms and voices lifted in praise. That may be with knees on the floor and head bowed in humble adoration. Our worship connects our soul to the divine that we find in spirit.

And our second reaction is much like Peter's – we want to preserve the moment, to not let it end. Being in that sweet spot with God is powerful. It is a life-changing, faith-defining moment. It is natural to want to hang on to that moment, to that feeling.

In our encounters with the divine we too are touched by the holy. In that presence we are filled with joy and compassion from being in God's presence. Worship can be one of those encounters. Laying aside our burdens and our cares from this world, we can enter into God's holy presence each time we gather in this place. But this can be challenging. Here we can take a clue from Moses. Turning briefly to our Old Testament reading for the week, we see how Moses was prepared to be in the presence of the holy. In Exodus 24, God calls Moses up mountain.

As Moses goes, glory settles on the mountain. Once there, though, Moses waits for six 6 days, preparing himself to encounter God. Then God speaks on the 7th day. Just like in our Matthew passage for today, the Lord speaks from the cloud of glory.

Moses' time in God's presence, time spent alone with God – it empowered him, just as Peter, James, and John's time did for them. This is so important – to be ready to be in God's presence. The world calls us to do, to get, and then to be. Society tells us to work hard, to accumulate things, then you will be happy. God, instead, calls us first to be. Coming to be in God's presence, to stand with the divine all around us, to rest in God's glory, this is why we gather to worship. When we prepare ourselves to be in the presence of God, when we choose to be connected to God, we go forth with God's presence upon us and with God's Spirit within us. Be in God's presence so that we can then be the representative of God in the world.

We gather because worship has the power to transform us. It can fill us with the divine so that when we go forth from here, our friends and family and neighbors and even the stranger can see the light and love of Christ shining forth from our heart.

In worship we express our desire to hear the voice of the divine. Here we long to feel the presence of God in ways that help us to hear the calling to serve, to love, and to give ourselves away for others. Today is about seeing and connecting with the power and might of God, with the divinity and holiness of Jesus. Worship is about allowing all of this to fill us so that we can bring this Jesus out into the world, allowing Christ to shine forth for all the world to see. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When was your last divine encounter? How did that change how you saw and worshipped God? What is a way to share this with others?
- 2) *Pray*. What distracts you from truly being in God's presence on a typical Sunday morning? Seek Holy Spirit power to remove these distractions.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 19:16-30. How does this passage tie together our call to be salt and light while also pointing others to the glory that is found in Christ?