

“Eyewitnesses of His Majesty”

Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21

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A year ago, I took you to this mountain: Mount Tabor, in northern Israel. Well, I didn't really *take* you there, not literally. I showed you several pictures of the mountain and the two majestic churches that now stand atop the mountaintop. Someday I'd like to take you there, for real. This is the mountain where, according to very old Christian tradition, the transfiguration of Jesus took place. *Transfiguration*, that's a fancy word that means “a change in form or appearance.” *Trans-figure-ation*. Today a lot of people associate that word with Harry Potter; transfiguration was one of the courses taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Changing a desk into a pig and back again, for example. But J. K. Rowling did not invent the concept of transfiguration; it was around *long* before she popularized it. It's here in the New Testament. Two of the gospel writers use the very word: “Jesus,” they tell us, “was *transfigured* before them.” (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2) His appearance ... changed. There on Mount Tabor, in the presence of three of his disciples, Jesus' appearance changed. Matthew says “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzlingly white.” Moses and Elijah appear, talking with Jesus, and then comes a cloud, with a voice, declaring in no uncertain terms that Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased; and commanding disciples both then and now to “listen to him.” Then it all fades; Jesus and the disciples head back down the mountain, and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about what they saw until after he is raised from the dead.

I used to struggle with this day in the Christian year. This is one of those stories that comes around in the lectionary every single year. Like Christmas, like Easter, we re-tell the story year after year. There came a point, early in my ministry, when I grew tired of the transfiguration story; I felt like I had run out of things to say about it. I was finding it hard to find a *message* to convey here, year after year, without becoming boring and repetitious. I have come to understand that there is a lot more to appreciate about this event than I had realized at the time. This is traditionally one of the Great Feasts of the church. But why? What did earlier generations of Christians see in this story, that I was missing?

To answer that question, I want to show you a few pieces of art. Here is one of the earliest known artistic depictions of the transfiguration. This is from a mosaic at St. Catherine's Monastery, at the base of Mount Sinai, in Egypt. Mount Sinai, you remember, is the mountain where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, and where – years later – God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. It's also where the prophet Elijah fled, when he was on the run from the wicked Queen Jezebel. There is a monastery at the base of Mount Sinai, that's been there for nearly 1500 years, and in that monastery is

this beautiful mosaic. It's three-dimensional; it's painted inside half of a dome, which is why it has the shape it has. The artist has tried to capture some of the essential elements of this story. That's Jesus, of course, in the center, in dazzling white clothes. He has a halo with a cross, reminding us of his holiness and his death that is to come. He is surrounded by a blue-ish oval shape; that's called a mandorla, an artistic term of Italian origin; it's essentially an oval-shaped frame that artists would use to depict sacred moments that transcend time and space. Mandorlas are often painted – as this one is – in several concentric bands of color, getting darker towards the center; the intent is to increase the contrast between the dark and light colors, thereby making the holiness of Christ appear all the more dazzling and brilliant. It was an artistic tool; trying to convey the majestic transcendence of this moment.

Christ is holding his hand in a sign of blessing. That element isn't specifically in the story, but the artist is trying to convey that Christ's intent is to bless his followers. On the ground, in front of and next to Jesus, are Peter (in the middle), James (on the right), and John (on the left). They are on their knees, or – in Peter's case – practically prostrate on the ground; Matthew tells us that when the three disciples heard the voice from the cloud, "they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear." The standing figure on the right is Moses; the standing figure on the left is Elijah; both of them are holding up their hands in blessing too. And if you look very closely, above Jesus' head, you can see a small hand coming down from the heavens; that represents the voice coming from the cloud, the divine voice of God.

So this is an attempt – a fifteen-centuries old attempt! – to convey some of the key elements in the transfiguration story. Jesus's face shining like the sun, his clothes dazzling white; Moses and Elijah appearing and talking with him. Moses, you remember, was the giver of the Law; Elijah was one of the most important Prophets; Jesus is both the *continuation* and the *fulfillment* of both the Law and the Prophets. Some interpreters also see in this story a foretaste of the resurrection, for the story points at the reality that Moses and Elijah are in the heavens, with God – for how else would they be able to appear and talk with Jesus, if they were not still *alive*, after all those centuries between them and Jesus?

Notice that, in this mosaic, there is no depiction of the mountain itself. It is wonderful to go to Mount Tabor, to the mountain where this event probably happened, but this artist either didn't want to try to depict a mountain scene, or felt that that the mountain wasn't an essential part of the story.

Here's another artistic depiction of the transfiguration, also from the 6th century. This one comes from a basilica in Ravenna, Italy, and again, it is painted inside a half-dome shape. But notice how different this one is. That person standing with his arms raised is *not* Jesus – that is, rather, a depiction of the saint whom the basilica was named after, a certain man named Apollinaris, who was believed to be a disciple of Peter. Jesus is represented here by the large jeweled cross, in a heavenly field of blue sky with stars. There's something that looks like the letter A and something that looks like the letter W to the left and right of the cross; those are the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, reminding us that Jesus is the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Moses and Elijah appear to the right and the left of the cross, but only the upper half of their bodies this time. But where are Peter and James and John? They are there, symbolically represented by the three large lambs, all of them looking up towards the cross. Twelve more lambs appear at the bottom of the painting, representing all twelve of Jesus' disciples, most of whom are at the base of the mountain when this story takes place. If you

look up high, you will once again see a hand descending from the heavens, representing the disembodied voice of almighty God. And notice that the mountain is once again not represented here – the artist, instead, has chosen to depict this scene in something like a garden ... a garden of paradise.

Fast-forward in time a number of centuries, and you come to this. This is by the 15th-century Italian painter Giovanni Bellini. At this point artists were trying to convey a greater sense of realism. So there's Jesus, of course, in his bright white clothes, with a very slight golden glow around his head. Moses and Elijah stand next to him, as if they were normal people in normal bodies. Peter, James, and John are on the ground in front of them, and there's a mountain in the background to remind people that the story is set on a mountaintop. The whole thing is set in a peaceful Italian valley. But this one isn't very impressive, is it? It lacks a feeling of real *transcendence*.

Contrast it with this: the *Transfiguration*, by the 16th-century Italian painter Raphael. This is one of the most famous oil paintings in the world. The top half depicts the transfiguration story itself – I'll come back to that in a moment – while the bottom half shows what is going on down at the base of the mountain with the rest of the disciples. Matthew tells the story, just after he tells about the transfiguration: a father brings his epileptic son to the disciples, and they try to cure him, but they fail. Jesus cures the boy when he comes down from the mountain. Raphael is trying to catch the drama of *both* events that were happening more-or-less simultaneously. Here's a closer view of the top half of the painting. There are Peter and James and John on the ground, again; there are Moses and Elijah, on either side of Jesus, and of course that's Jesus in the middle. But notice that he's not touching the ground. He has risen – like he will rise at the resurrection, like he will ascend at the ascension. Raphael gives us a glimpse of the transcendence of Jesus, the divinity of Christ. For this moment was when those three disciples first caught a glimpse of Christ's eternal glory, his majestic radiance and splendor.

And that, really, is the point of the story. Words really do not do this story justice; *art* does a better job. It is that glory, that majestic radiance, that Peter remembers when, years later, he wrote these words: Jesus “received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” Peter and James and John caught a glimpse of glory of Christ; they were, in his words, “eyewitnesses of his majesty.” This is a holy moment, a transcendent moment; the *only* time between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection when *any* of the disciples had a chance to see him, *as he truly is*. Majestic. Glorious. *Divine*.

Artists through the centuries have tried to give us a little *taste* of what that divine majesty looks like. Here ... and here ... and here. These are but a few, out of *many* I could have shown you. We do not have the privilege of being eyewitnesses of Christ's majesty, the way Peter and James and John were. But artists through the centuries have tried to *imagine* what that majesty was like, have tried to give us a *little taste* of Christ's magnificent glory. And if these artists came even remotely close to depicting the glory of Christ *as he truly is* ... well, it must really be magnificent. It must *truly* be glorious ... and divine.

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