

## “Transfigured!”

2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

February 14, 2021 • Transfiguration of the Lord

If you were with us before the start of the prelude this morning, or if you have looked at the printed version of the bulletin for today, you will see a piece of art, *The Transfiguration of Jesus*, by the Danish painter Carl Bloch. This is one of many artistic depictions of the Transfiguration, and it captures very well the beauty and complexity of that moment atop a high mountain in Galilee. Jesus is at the center of it all, clothed in a dazzling white robe, and bathed in a glorious light descending upon him from the heavens. Standing with him are Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures from the Old Testament. They, too, are bathed in that glorious light from on high. Surrounding and enshrouding all of them is a magnificent white cloud. In the foreground, cowering in fear and awe, watching but nearly being blinded, are the three disciples, Peter, James, and John. It is a faithful representation of one of the most complex, mystifying, and hard-to-explain moments anywhere in the gospel story.

Each of those six individuals atop that mountain has their own unique history and destiny. Peter, James, and John were just Jewish fishermen in Galilee, until Jesus called them to leave behind their boats and their nets to follow Jesus. Peter ultimately became a pillar in the early church; early Christian writings indicate that he was a leader of the church in Rome; some say that he was the first bishop in Rome; Catholics would say, the first Pope. He is believed to have been crucified, during the persecution under Emperor Nero, in the year 64; legend says that he was crucified upside-down. St. Peter’s Basilica and St. Peter’s Square, in the Vatican City, are, of course, named after him; so is the city of St. Petersburg in Russia, and St. Petersburg in Florida, along with countless other churches and towns. James, like Peter, started out his life as a fisherman in Galilee; also like Peter, his life came to a violent end: Herod Agrippa, the King of Judea and grandson of Herod the Great, had him executed in about the year 44, only about 14 years after Christ’s resurrection. That story is told, briefly, in the Acts of the Apostles. James’ brother John lived much longer than either of the other two. John, like Peter, became a pillar in the early church, and, according to an early Christian tradition, was the author of the gospel of John, and possibly also the book of Revelation. There are churches and cities named for him as well.

But all of that illustrious history was ahead of them. When Jesus takes them up the mountain, all three of these men are still little more than fishermen. All are probably, at this point, illiterate. They are still in the beginning stages of their Christian journey, trying to understand what they are beholding.

What they behold is magnificent. First of all, they behold Jesus, whose appearance has been utterly changed. It was a dusty walk up that mountainside, yet Jesus now stands before them not in a drab brown cloak and weather-beaten sandals, but in the fullness of his glory. They are gaining a glimpse of what Christ looks like not on *earth*, but in *heaven*, bathed with the radiance of the divine.

With Jesus stands Moses, the great leader of the Jews during the exodus from Egypt and the forty years of wilderness wanderings. Moses had a speech impediment, but that didn't matter to God. Moses had killed a man, but God had looked beyond that. God often uses flawed and imperfect people to accomplish God's divine purpose. God used Moses to display signs and wonders to Pharaoh and the people of Egypt; God used Moses to deliver God's law to the people of Israel; God used Moses to bring water from a rock in a barren desert; God used Moses to bring God's people right to the very entry to the Promised Land, through a great deal of trouble and hardship, including both rebellion and war. Moses had predicted that God "will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people" (Deuteronomy 18:15); we Christians would say that he was talking about Jesus. Moses died on a mountain just across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho; Moses had a chance to behold the whole Promised Land, stretched out before him, the goal and culmination of four decades' worth of labor.

Also with Jesus stands Elijah, one of the earliest and most significant of the biblical prophets. Elijah lived in the northern kingdom of Israel about 900 years before Jesus, during the reign of a king named Ahab. Ahab married Jezebel, a princess of a neighboring kingdom to the north. Jezebel was also a priestess of the Canaanite god Baal, and persuaded Ahab to abandon his worship of the God of Israel. Ahab built a temple and an altar to Baal in the city of Samaria, and allowed his wife to launch a vicious persecution against the faithful prophets of God – prophets like Elijah. Elijah refused to recant his beliefs, defended the worship of God, humbled 850 false prophets in a contest, brought about an end to a famine through his prayers, was forced to flee from the wrath of Jezebel all the way to Mount Horeb (that is, Mount Sinai, where Moses had received the Ten Commandments), heard the voice of God speaking to him in a "still, small voice," anointed a new King over Israel, confronted King Ahab one more time, and mentored a younger prophet named Elisha. Along the way he performed various miraculous healings, like bringing a widow's dead son back to life. Finally, Elijah ascended to heaven in a "whirlwind," separated from his protégé by a chariot of fire, thus making Elijah one of only two people in the entire Old Testament who did not die but were taken by God to heaven via some other means.

But Elijah would be back. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi said that God would send Elijah "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents." (Malachi 4:5-6) Jewish legends about Elijah abound; still to this day, Jews pour an extra cup of wine at the Passover meal, to welcome Elijah when he comes.

But we Christians say that Elijah has *already* come. There were some who thought that *Jesus* was Elijah returned; there were others who thought that Elijah might rescue Jesus when Jesus was hanging on the cross to die; but what Jesus says is that *John the Baptist* was Elijah returned (Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13) – even though John himself didn't seem to be aware of that (John 1:21). The prophecy from Malachi had reached its fulfillment; *Elijah had come*. And the Messiah – *Jesus* – came soon after.

So, to be clear, standing with Jesus atop that mountain, wrapped in a heavenly cloud, are *Jesus*, the long-awaited Messiah; and *Moses*, who delivered the Law to the people of Israel; and *Elijah*, the faithful prophet and herald of the Messianic Age. So Jesus is surrounded by the key people who symbolize and represent the *Law* and the *Prophets* – the full extent of Jewish history and tradition.

If Peter, James, and John were *awestruck* by what they beheld – well, it was with good reason. If they had some trouble comprehending the *magnitude* of it all – well, there was a *lot* to comprehend. Everything is coming together in this one moment: the past, the present, and the future; the dead, the living, and the never-to-die; the earth below, and the heavens above; and the majestic *glory* of God.

Every time I come back to this story, I find new layers and depths that I haven't grasped before.

Much of this is magnificently captured in Carl Bloch's painting, and in many other artistic renderings of the Transfiguration. But there's one element that most of the artwork doesn't capture: *the voice*. The voice from the cloud, the voice of God Almighty, the voice speaking not to Jesus, not to Moses or Elijah, but to those three awestruck men, the human witnesses of this momentous event. The voice says only nine words: two short clauses – one, a simple declaration; the other, a simple command.

The declaration: "This is my Son, the Beloved." It is an echo, practically a repetition, of the words that came from heaven when Jesus was baptized. Let there be no mistake: the voice is telling the witnesses – and, by extension, *us* – who Jesus really is. The Son of God. The *beloved* Son of God. He is not just a man, not just some kind of miracle worker or prophet, not just someone with an uncanny understanding of the Jewish Law and its *real* meaning and purpose, but *God's representative, God's ambassador, God's anointed Messiah*, not someone *created* by God, the way the rest of us are, but someone *begotten* by God, *born* as the very *offspring* of God, whom God utterly and absolutely *loves*.

The command: "*Listen to him!*" This command follows naturally from the declaration. *Because* Jesus is God's beloved Son, *therefore* his words *have the authority of God*. The human race has an opportunity to hear the Word of God *in the flesh*, in auditory form, using their very own ears. What Jesus says *matters*. This isn't just some Jewish rabbi, offering his own interpretation of the Law. This is *God enfleshed*. His Word is just as sacred, just as illuminating, just as authoritative, just as revelatory, as the word of God Almighty. If you care about your soul, you would be wise to heed his words!

Peter and James and John were, understandably, awestruck by what their eyes and ears experienced up there on the mountain. Bloch's painting, and many others, depict them fearful, trembling, yet transfixed, their eyes *glued* on Jesus. This is the *glory of God* they are beholding.

It is the reaction that all the rest of us really ought to have when confronted with the reality and the power and the transcendence of the divine majesty. Far too often, we simply do not give God – or Jesus – the proper amount of *respect*, the proper amount of *admiration*, the proper amount of *awe*.

There was a book that came out when I was in seminary, written by a highly respected contemporary theologian named William Placher, who is now deceased. The book was called *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*. In it, Placher said that something fundamental shifted in Christian theology three hundred years ago: "Before the seventeenth century, most Christian theologians were struck by the mystery and wholly otherness of God, and the inadequacy of any human categories as applied to God." But then God became just another "object" to be studied. We lost that profound and utter sense of *awe*. Placher takes 240 pages to spell this out in detail, but you get the point: he thinks we've lost something *important*, something *critical*, something *vital*, something that we *used to have*, prior to the age of reason. A sense of *awe* at Almighty God.

There is no *moral* to the Transfiguration story. It is not like one of Jesus' parables, not like his Sermon on the Mount. There is no clear *message* here, other than those brief words from the cloud. The point of the story is really not to tell us *what to do*. The point of the story, really, is to so overwhelm us with *majesty* that we simply *react* in ways similar to Peter, James, and John: we fall down with a profoundly overwhelming sense of *awe* at the marvelous, dazzling, magnificent *glory* of Jesus Christ.

© 2021 Rev. Bill Pinches