

## “Bright as a Flash of Lightning”

Luke 9:28-36

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Transfiguration of the Lord

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of the Lord, that odd and mysterious story in the gospels about a particularly significant moment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. I was talking about this story with the children and youth of the church a few weeks ago, and I was met with blank stares, even from the students who have been the most faithful in their attendance and participation over the years. This is not a story that they knew well; typical Sunday School curricula rarely cover it, because – well, because it’s *weird*, and hard to understand. Many Christian adults don’t know or understand this story very well either. In the early years of my ministry, I wondered why we had a day commemorating this event every year. What is so special about this story that it merits discussion *every single year*?

I’ve learned a lot since then. Over time this has become one of my favorite stories, and one of my favorite annual events in the life of the church. There is *so much* going on here, and every year I learn more. But if you’re looking for direct practical application to your personal life, you may be disappointed. This story is far more about *Jesus* than it is about *us*. This story shows us *the glory of Christ*. That glory *matters*. Would that we could behold it *every single day*. Once a year is not enough!

The story starts out simply enough. Jesus takes three of his principal disciples – Simon Peter and John and James – and they go up to the top of a mountain. It might have been this mountain: Mount Tabor, in Galilee, about 10 miles west and a smidge south of the Sea of Galilee – a single, solitary hill, rising more than 1800 feet over the surrounding plains. They go up there to pray. Jesus had a habit of going up mountains to enjoy some alone time with God; this is not the only story in which he does that.

But this time is different. “While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” That’s a change from how we used to hear this story; many older translations said his clothes became “dazzlingly white,” but a number of the newer versions describe his clothes as “flashing like lightning.” The point is, his face and clothes are shining *incredibly* brightly, glistening with a radiance that is nearly too bright for the mortal eye to behold.

What we have here is a *theophany* – an appearance, a manifestation, of almighty God. It’s like how God appeared to the Israelites over the top of Mount Sinai, back in the book of Exodus: “there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain.... Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.... When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.” What the Israelites beheld on Mount Sinai, and what Peter, James, and John beheld on Mount Tabor,

were displays of the awesome divine energy of God. Not many people get to see that energy in this life.

In the first epistle of John we are told: “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” Ancient Christian tradition says those words were penned by the same John who beheld Christ’s glory on the mountain. John *knew* what he was talking about; he had *seen* God’s light with his very own eyes.

If there was any question in the minds of those three disciples about who Jesus was, about whether he really was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, that manifestation of the divine glory should have been enough to quench any and all doubts. But that was just the beginning.

Next they behold two men talking with Jesus on the mountain. These men also “appeared in glory.” They were supernatural appearances of two specific people from the history of the people of Israel. The first was Moses, the great lawgiver, the one who beheld God’s glory in the burning bush, who delivered the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, who served as God’s mediator in giving the Law to the Israelites, who led the Israelites through forty hard years in the wilderness, ultimately bringing them to the brink of the Promised Land. Moses died and was buried in the plains of Moab, some twelve hundred years before Jesus, and he never appeared to anyone in a vision or in any other way – until he appeared there, on the top of that mountain, with Jesus. But his influence was huge; to this day both Jews and Christians refer to the body of laws that were given to the Israelites as “the law of Moses.”

The second person to appear on the mountaintop was Elijah, one of the great Old Testament prophets. He figures prominently in the last six chapters of 1 Kings, and the first two chapters in 2 Kings. He defended and supported the worship of God when many of the Israelites were worshiping the false god Ba’al. He strongly encouraged people to follow God’s teachings, even when those teachings were unpopular. He performed a number of miracles; he even brought a widow’s son back to life. At the end of his life he did not die, but was taken up by God into heaven in a whirlwind. The prophet Malachi foretold that God would send Elijah back to earth “before the great and awesome day of the Lord.”

So two immensely important and deeply faithful people of God appeared in glory with Jesus on the mountaintop. The three of them had a conversation. They were speaking about Jesus’ “departure” – the culmination and the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry. This story thus marks the end of the first phase of Jesus’ ministry and the beginning of the next. Up until now Jesus has been teaching and healing and gathering disciples. From this point on Jesus’ ministry is directed towards its conclusion. I’m inclined to think that God sent Moses and Elijah, at least in part, to give Jesus strength for the rest of his journey.

There’s a reason why we remember this story every year just before the beginning of the season of Lent. For we, too, are about to make that journey with Jesus – the journey to the cross and the tomb.

So Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the Prophets – the two pillars of the ancient Jewish faith. Moses, being dead, also represents all those who have died; while Elijah, never having died, represents all those who are alive, perhaps especially those who are alive in Christ. The Law comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. So too do the Prophets. Those who are dead will have an opportunity to be raised to new life with Christ, and those who are alive have an opportunity to gain eternal life.

Peter and James and John behold all this, and marvel. Peter wants to set up three tents, three “booths,” three temporary shelters, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Jews would set up booths – indeed, many Jews still do – at the festival of Sukkoth every year, in the fall, to remember how they lived in the wilderness after their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The booths thus represent

God's provision, protection, and care. Setting up booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah would have a similar effect: it would be a sign for Christ's disciples of God's *ongoing* provision, protection, and care.

But regardless of whether or not that was a good idea, before any of the three disciples can do anything, they find themselves enveloped in a great cloud that settles on the top of the mountain. This is another sign of the presence of almighty God; it recalls not only the cloud that settled at the top of Mount Sinai, but also the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites by day on their journey out of Egypt.

Finally comes a voice, a voice from within the cloud, like the voice the Israelites heard at Mount Sinai when God spoke the words of the Law, and also like the voice that the disciples of John the Baptist heard when he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. "This is my Son," the voice says, "my Chosen; listen to him!" The words are remarkably similar to the words that were spoken over Jesus at his baptism, affirming, if there were any doubt, that Jesus *is* the Son of God. He did not *become* the Son of God; God did not *adopt* him. No, Jesus is the Son of God by his very nature, "eternally begotten of the Father," as the creeds say; that is, Jesus was the Son of God *infinitely* prior to his birth and baptism. As John would later write, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If you think John's words about Jesus are majestic and inspired, well, they were. John *beheld* all this glory. John *heard* the voice from the cloud. God the Father, speaking about God the Son, the Chosen One.

Then, just as suddenly as the glory had appeared, it all vanishes. Jesus' face and clothes return to their normal hues. Moses and Elijah are nowhere to be found. The cloud dissipates into nothingness. The three disciples find themselves alone with Jesus. They have absolutely nothing to say. Astonished, overwhelmed, awestruck, shocked, thunderstruck – these words probably do not even begin to describe how they were feeling. You can't behold the majestic glory of God without being utterly *amazed*.

That's pretty much the story. They descend from the mountain; Jesus continues his ministry; things return pretty much to the way they had been before. Except ... except ... Peter and James and John now have a memory of an experience that they will never forget. They may not have understood what it meant – I'm pretty sure they *didn't* understand what it all meant, not until later, not until after the resurrection, maybe not even until Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon them – but I have no doubt that the experience left an indelible impression on them. *They had beheld the glory of God.*

Peter wrote about this event later on. In his second letter, he says: "we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory.... We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain." John likewise wrote, "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." James didn't leave behind any writings; he was killed during one of the early persecutions against Christians. But I'm sure he remembered the glory of God to the end of his days.

The other disciples of Jesus weren't there. They didn't get to see it. None of them. Neither do we. But there have been countless attempts, in Christian art and architecture, to try to represent the glory of God as best we can. Have you ever walked into a grand cathedral and just marveled in awe at the beauty and grandeur of it all? I'm inclined to think even the most majestic artistic endeavor still pales in comparison to the dazzling radiance that is almighty God, that is Christ in all his heavenly glory.

We may never have an opportunity to see it in *this* lifetime. But in the *next* ... yes. In the *next*....

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