

# Jesus' Transfiguration Prepares You For His Passion!

A sermon based on Matthew 17:1-9

One of the popular genres of movie over the past few years is the story of the superhero. And you know how it goes. Before he gets to the real challenge, the superhero must face some smaller problems. Before he gets to the supervillian—the mastermind behind the destruction of the planet—he first has to defeat a few thugs that aren't really a threat to him, right?

But why does it always happen that way? It's because those smaller victories reveal to you who the hero is. They show his superpowers so you know that he has what it takes to take care of the supervillian. This glimpse of power prepares you for the real struggle.

Today, as we take a look at Jesus' Transfiguration, we see how God does the same thing for us. He reveals to us the strength of our superhero, Jesus, as he's revealed as true God by a glimpse of his true glory. And the timing of this revelation of who Jesus is was no accident. Right before he began to head toward Jerusalem and the real struggle of dying for the sins of the world, this glimpse of his glory prepared his disciples (and prepares us) for the coming days, for his Passion. We can be certain that Jesus is the Son of God who can (who *has*) overcome all our enemies.

Listen again to Matthew's account of the Transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17:1-9 and see how Jesus' transfiguration prepares us for his passion.

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

***<sup>4</sup> 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."***

***<sup>5</sup> 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!"***

***<sup>6</sup> When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. <sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." <sup>8</sup> When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.***

***<sup>9</sup> 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."***

Our text begins, ***"About eight days after Jesus said this..."*** But, said what? Well, a week earlier Jesus ***"began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*** (Matthew 16:21)

He explained that they were going to Jerusalem so he could accomplish his mission. And in plain, simple speech he told them exactly how it would happen. But first, he would give them a glimpse of the kingdom of God. And that's exactly what he did one week later.

Now, after a physically exhausting climb to the top of a mountain, the disciples were understandably worn out. Luke tells us in his account that they were **"very sleepy."** But nothing like having a spotlight shined in your face to wake you up, right? What a startling sight the three saw! Jesus face was lit up as bright as the sun itself! His clothes were **"whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them"** (Mark 9:3), **"as white as the light!"** And he wasn't the only one shining!

There with him was the prophet Moses—the one with whom God had spoken face to face! The one through whom the law was given! And with *him* was Elijah—one of the truly great prophets, who never even had to face death! What guests! What glory! What a privilege for these disciples to see the kingdom of God!

And Peter rightly confessed, **"Lord, it is good for us to be here!"** And though he wanted to contain the glory that was on that mountain and bottle it up with a couple of tents, that's not what Jesus had in mind. Jesus hadn't come to bring heaven to earth, but to bring sinners from this earth into heaven. And to do that Jesus still had to suffer and die. He still had to go to Jerusalem. He still had to go to his Passion. Lent was yet to come.

But *with* Lent right around the corner, how good it *was* for Peter, James and John to see what they did! For on that mountain Jesus revealed his glory. Though he usually walked around like an ordinary man, with **"no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him,"** as Isaiah put it (Isaiah 53:2b), though he usually looked more like Clark Kent than Superman, now Jesus pulled back his humanity to reveal just a glimpse of his glory to the disciples, like Clark Kent pulling off the glasses, shirt and tie to reveal his tights and cape. Here, for a brief moment, Jesus let his divinity shine through clearly to reveal who he was! If the miracles he had performed had left any doubt of who Jesus really was, for Peter James and John that doubt was certainly removed there on the mountain!

And how clearly you and I see who Jesus is! Through the pages of God's Word we've seen glimpses of his divine glory! We saw the Holy Spirit descend on him and heard God the Father boast about him. We've seen him turn water into wine and watched as he walked through an angry mob intent on killing him. We've witnessed the miraculous catch of fish and heard his powerful preaching. But now, seeing his glory shine through at his transfiguration, we see Jesus' divinity shine through more clearly than before! While Moses *reflected* the glory of God, as the book of Exodus tells us, Jesus glowed with it himself! While Elijah *went up* to the glory of God in a chariot of fire (cf. 2 Kings 2:11), Jesus brought the glory of God *down to earth* in his person. And here, on the mountain, at the epitome of Epiphany, *we* have seen Jesus revealed in his glory!

For Peter, James and John, this revelation of Jesus' glory couldn't have come at a better time: right before they began the slow, long, march to Jerusalem and to Holy Week, the pinnacle of Jesus' Passion, when they would be tempted to wonder if Jesus really was God. After all, if he had the power to stop disease, why didn't he stop these men from scourging him? If he could raise the dead to life, why didn't he prevent his own death?

But for now, they weren't even thinking that far ahead. Instead, Peter wanted to stay in the moment. He said, **"I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."** And Jesus had neither the time nor the need to respond to Peter's request. God the Father did it for him: **While [Peter] 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!"**

God pointed out to Peter that Jesus was his chosen one. The same chosen one of whom he previously had said, **"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight..."** (Isaiah 42:1), that chosen servant of whom God said, **"...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."** (Isaiah 53:4-5)

This is the mission that Moses, Elijah, and *all* the prophets described. This is the mission Jesus explained to his disciples when he said **"that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** (Matthew 16:21) This is the mission the chosen one—the Messiah—had come to fulfill. Jesus was talking about Lent and about his Passion.

And as we get ready to begin our slow, long, march to Jerusalem and to Holy Week this Lenten season, what a great lead-in we get with this account of Jesus' transfiguration! As we hear how he suffers and dies, we can take comfort that Jesus is true God and that even though as true God, he could have easily stopped his suffering at any time, he didn't. He willingly endured it all out of love for you and me. We can take comfort that his death wasn't just the death of a man, but the death of God himself. And what a comfort that is! To know that it was God's blood shed on the cross is to know that his sacrifice was enough to pay for your sins and for mine—for every one of them!

So how do we respond this coming Lenten season? We do what God told Peter, James and John to do: We **"Listen to him!"** We listen as he is betrayed, not just by Judas, but by us. We listen as he is denied by Peter, and by us. We listen as the innocent Christ is declared guilty for us. We listen as he's handed over to be beaten and flogged and humiliated to pay for our sins. We listen as he's abandoned by God the Father to hell to make things right between God and us.

And we listen to the forgiveness that he speaks to us in those acts—the forgiveness for every one of our sins: For our betrayal of Jesus in our selfish actions, for our denial of him in our reckless speech, for not listening to him in his Word! And when we listen to the Word of that forgiveness, Jesus comforts us and says to us, **"Get up... Don't be afraid."**

We listen to his Passion this Lent, and we rejoice—that because of it, one day soon, we too will shine with glory like Moses and Elijah did on that mountain top, like Peter, James and John and all the saints who have gone before us do right now! And while we can't have that glory here on earth, who needs it?! We rejoice that soon we will *leave* this earth for the glory of heaven to experience Jesus' glory first hand!

So listen to him, friends, and take comfort in his Word. Jesus, who is revealed as true God in all his glory in this epitome of Epiphany, is our superhero. And with this lead-in to Lent, we're eager to hear more of what he's done for us and for our salvation, because now that we've seen his glory, we're ready to walk with Jesus through his Passion. Amen.