

Dear Future Me: See Christ!

A sermon based on Matthew 17:1-9 - ***After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.***

⁴ 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.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ 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.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It’s good to be here! Do you feel that way, too? When you woke up today, seeing the sun shining (or maybe it wasn’t) and knowing the temps are on the rise (or maybe they’re not), did you have joy the moment you started thinking about where you would be a short while later...here? If so, why? Getting to see your church friends again? The delicious after-worship snacks and fellowship? To see this bright, shining face again?

I cannot tell you how good it is to be here, the highlight of my week, sharing Jesus with you, growing in faith in Jesus with you, encouraging you, being encouraged by you...seeing Christ with you, my Light of the World family. It’s good to be here!

But it’s also good for us to be here, with Jesus, in the gospel for today, on this mountainside. Not good in the sense that, you know, Peter, my brother James, and I are somehow more deserving than the other disciples. But it’s good for us to be here, alone, because it’s what we really need right now. Some quiet time to just think, to ponder. Think about what? Well, the past few days. Jesus really spoke some hard-hitting AND hard-to-chew thoughts to us.

Let me start. A few days ago, Jesus had polled us to see what other people were saying about him, about who they thought he was. But when Jesus asked Peter who HE thought Jesus was...ahhhhh, the perfect confession: ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16)***. He was acknowledging Jesus for who he truly was, true God.

But then, Jesus kind of did a 180 and told us that he, true God, was going to suffer at the hands of the Jews, *he* had to die, but *he* would also come back to life. It didn't really make sense that our Savior, our Messiah, our Lord and God, should die, so you know what Peter did? He took Jesus to the side and tried to tell him that couldn't, that wouldn't happen, to which Jesus responded, to PETER, ***"Get behind me Satan!" (Matthew 16:23)***. And to add to the confusion, Jesus told us following him would not be easy. Why not? Well, in order to follow him, we'd have to undergo sufferings, even persecution and death, all to follow Jesus.

I'll be honest, those were definitely some tough sayings, so it really is good to be here, with Jesus, on this mountainside. Maybe good to get some clarification from Jesus, maybe good to have some alone time to talk some sense into him, but really it's just good to be here with him, comforting to see him.

But peace and quiet aren't really in the plans.

During my moments of quiet thinking, I admit I was starting to nod off, but then I jerked awake to see this great light surrounding me. And with eyes wide open, I see Jesus...I think. I mean, it's Jesus, but there's something different about him. He's changed. It's as if his whole body's covered in beaming white light. There's really not good way to explain what he looks like, but the Gospel writers describe his appearance like this, ***"his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light"...***his clothes were ***"dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them" (Mark 9:3)***...they were as ***"bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29)***. Now that's the Lord of glory, the Messiah we know he is!

It's a sight to see, but it doesn't end there. I blink, and wait a second, that can't be right. Where there was one, now there are three. Jesus has some visitors. It's like they just appeared out of thin air.

To the side I see Peter and James rubbing their eyes and squinting. So, I'm not just seeing things. There are two men physically standing there with Jesus, talking with him.

"Isn't that Moses?" James hesitantly asks. Oddly enough, I was thinking the same thing.

Peter pipes in, "And the other guy, he's, uh..." "ELIJAH!?!?" I exclaim, finishing Peter's sentence. "You guys, you do realize we are looking at arguably the two greatest men of the Old Testament, right?!?" It's like, if you could choose one/two people in history you would like to have lunch with...for me, these two men, hands down my choice!

I can't explain how I know, but it's definitely them. It's Moses and Elijah! But why are they here? Hmm...let's see, they both had unique departures from this earth, Moses being buried by God, Elijah leaving in style, in a chariot of fire. But there's more to it. Moses, the great law-giver. Elijah, arguably the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. These guys really represent the whole Old Testament, and now, their main message, the message of the entire Old Testament, is culminating in the one person we see, the one standing before us, Jesus, shining before us, showing us a glimpse of his glory.

That's not the right question, though. It's not so important why they are here, but for what purpose they have come. Do you hear what Moses and Elijah and Jesus are talking about? Luke tells us in his

gospel. They're talking about Jesus' departure, his upcoming death and resurrection. The real purpose of Jesus' life, to accomplish for us the full and free forgiveness of sins.

Peter, James, and I just stand there, awestruck, star-struck, dumbfounded, TERRIFIED!!! Peter's the first to speak – ***“Lord, it's good for us to be here.”*** Actually, he was saying, “Lord, it's good THAT we are here, that we're physically here, so if you want to put us to use...if you want us to put up a few tents for you and your guests, we'll do that!”

Kind of an odd thing to say at the time. Why would saints of heaven need tents here on earth? Why would they want to stay here when heaven is so much better? But hey, Peter's afraid, just like the rest of us. What would you say if you were in our shoes???

But do you see a point in Peter's words? Maybe he wants them to stay a little longer. Seeing this wonderful sight, especially Jesus in his splendor, giving us a glimpse of his divine glory, why wouldn't we want this to last, even if just for a little more?!?

But just as Peter finishes speaking, the heavens open up. A bright cloud envelops us, and a booming voice, like the sound of a frightening crash of thunder: ***“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well please. Listen to him!”***

It's obvious who's speaking...it's God! His words have a familiar ring...I've heard them before. But where? Oh yeah, at Jesus' baptism. God had spoken those same words, words which signified the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

But why these words now? Oh, well now it all makes sense, everything Jesus has been telling us all along. He really does *have* to go to Jerusalem to finish his work. He really does *have* to die. It's the beginning of the END of Jesus' work, the beginning of his passion, his road to the cross, his road to leaving the world, his road to leaving us.

“Listen to him!” This whole experience, everything we've seen, it's had a purpose. Jesus changing, giving us a glimpse of his heavenly glory. Moses and Elijah appearing, giving Jesus encouragement for his upcoming death. God the Father reaffirming Jesus as his own beloved Son. It's all been pointing to Jesus as being true God.

Which adds more weight to God's command to listen to Jesus. But then that means everything he's said is true. That means, he is going to die, just as he's told us many times already he's going to have to do.

But why? Why does he need to die?

I know we're still a few months away from his death, but I'll be with him most of the way. I see him all decked out in glorious splendor now, but shortly, I will see him in his darkest hours, in complete humiliation. I'll be one of the disciples falling asleep while Jesus fervently prays to his Father in Gethsemane, asking for some other way, but in the end knowing it's God's will for him to die. I'll be there when an angry mob shows up to arrest Jesus, betrayed by one of our own. I'll be there, standing

at the foot of the cross, listening to crowds of people mocking Jesus while he's on the cross, dying in their place, dying in MY place.

And thoughts of my shortcomings start racing through my mind. Why did I think it was so important to argue with the other disciples about who was the best, being proud and arrogant, thinking I was destined to be sitting closest to Jesus in his kingdom? Why did I shoo children away from Jesus when their parents merely wanted Jesus to bless them, as if these little kids weren't important enough for Jesus, weren't worth his time? Why have I doubted Jesus so many times, thinking he was a madman, a liar, whenever he told me and the other disciples he HAD to die? When I have the chance, why won't I defend Jesus against his accusers, when he's arrested, when people jeer him as he hangs innocently and helplessly on the tree?

Every lustful thought, every lie, every hateful action, every sin, I see it all so clearly now...I don't deserve to be here, seeing Jesus in his glory. I deserve to die and see hell, not Jesus.

"LISTEN TO HIM!" That phrase from the Father continues to echo in my mind. Not only is everything Jesus has said true. Everything ever said about Jesus, all of God's Word, is true as well. Isaiah, another of the great Old Testament prophets, said about Jesus, ***"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all"*** (Isaiah 53:4-6).

It's God's plan for Jesus to die. God loves the world, loves you and me, so much he's sent his one and only Son so we won't perish. Jesus has come into the world to win forgiveness...for us, for all our sins. Jesus, our glorious Master, the almighty Lord, the promised Messiah, standing before us now, sharing with us just a glimpse of his glory, but the only way to save us was by walking the dark and lonely path to the cross, the path only Jesus could walk.

And he did: ***"the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed"*** (Isaiah 53:5).

Do you know what the best part of Jesus' transfiguration is? This is only a small fraction of his glory. The best is still to come! Do you see? Jesus' death on the cross isn't the end of the story. Jesus hasn't just said he will die, and then that's it. He's also told us over and over again he will rise, victorious over sin, death, and the devil. Three days later, Easter morning, Christ's miraculous resurrection, that'll be the ultimate, the complete display of his eternal glory. Wow, Lord, it's good for us to be here...to see that!

But, you know, thinking of everything coming up, in awe of the presence of God and his loving plan to save the world, to save me, it's too much. I fall to my knees humbled, face to the ground.

Only a few seconds pass before a hand gently rests on my shoulder. "It's ok, you can stand. Don't be afraid."

I open my eyes, and it's like the past few minutes were only a dream, a dream I didn't want to end. But now, it's just me, and Peter, and James, and Jesus. But Jesus is right. There's nothing to be afraid of.

He's already shown his glory...he is God, powerful over sin, death, and the devil. I've heard him promise he has to die BUT he'll come back to life, more glorious than before. Even during the darkest moments of my life, when sin overwhelms me and makes me lose my way, when temptations are too heavy to bear and cause me to stumble, I see Jesus; his forgiveness will clothe me and his heavenly glory will light my way.

As we go back down the mountain, Jesus tells us to keep this a secret...well, at least until after he rises from the dead. It'll be tough, but honestly, by the time Jesus rises, this event won't even be able to hold a candle to his full display of power and might and glory! You wait and see!

Lord, it's been good to be here to see your glory, to hear your voice, to have the assurance you truly are who you say you are. You are God! Lord, it's been good for us to be here with you on this mountain, especially in light of the coming events.

We're in for a tough stretch, the dark road leading to the cross...but it'll only be for a little while. During these coming days, as difficult and somber as they might be, we can keep our eyes on the light at the end of the road, the light of your glorious resurrection from the grave, the final act of your work of defeating sin, death, and the devil, the assurance of our forgiveness. And best of all, we can look forward to the best gift of all, a place in the kingdom of your heavenly light, living in your grace, seeing your glory for the rest of our lives. So dear future you, keep looking. No matter what, keep your eyes on the cross, on Christ, on his resurrection victory...on his eternal victory for you. Amen.

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