

## **Living the Transfigured Life**

**Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9**

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We've all had them, those times when we were transported beyond the mundane, routine affairs of life into higher realms of spiritual delight and joy. It may have been a Walk to Emmaus, a mission trip, maybe a Bible study group, or some other experience that moved you to the mountaintop. For Peter, James, and John, those three disciples who appear to be the inner circle of the Twelve, it was this experience in Matthew 17 that we now call the Transfiguration of Jesus. This was the mountain top experience to top all mountain top experiences.

I must confess, though, that I've often struggled to understand the application of this text for us. It is easy to see how this would have been a deeply moving experience for Peter, James, and John. But what about us? We weren't there, so what does it mean for us? That was my struggle, until I saw the connection between this text and what happened six days earlier.

According to Matthew, six days before the mountain top transfiguration Jesus and his disciples were in Caesarea Philippi. The disciples told Jesus that the local people in Philippi had mixed opinions about who he was. Some were saying that he was John the Baptist come back to life. Others thought he might be Elijah or one of the other prophets of Israel. In a masterful way so common with Jesus, Jesus turned the question to them, making it personal, as faith always must be, "But who do you say that I am?"

It was Peter who took the lead. In response to this question of Jesus, Peter made his greatest confession and one of his greatest blunders. Peter rightly said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." That was his greatest confession. Jesus praised Peter for that answer and began to tell Peter and the others how he must suffer at the hands of the religious leaders and finally be killed. Upon hearing these words about suffering and death, Peter stepped forward again, this time rebuking Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." His greatest blunder!

Jesus responded to Peter with these harsh words, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Jesus went on to explain to Peter and the other disciples that if they wanted to follow him they had to deny self, take up their own suffering, their “cross,” and then follow. That was his way. Jesus tried to explain that his way was not about gaining the whole world and, in the process, losing one’s soul. He was willing to lose his life to be faithful to God.

Then Matthew says that six days after that Peter, James, and John had the mountain top experience to top all mountain top experiences. Jesus took the three up a high mountain. There, the text says, Jesus was transformed before them. The Greek word is *metamorphoomai*, from which we get the word metamorphosis. It is in the passive voice meaning that the transformation was done to Jesus, not by him. Apparently God the Heavenly Parent changed God the Son, so that Jesus’ face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly two Old Testament figures, Moses and the prophet Elijah, were standing and talking with Jesus. Peter took the lead again. He said in essence, “It’s a good thing we’re here, Lord. Do you want us to make three dwelling places: one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?”

I just love Peter. I love him for his commitment. He was a 100 percent disciple of Jesus Christ. He was willing to back up his words with his actions. He held nothing back.

This time, however, he did not get to build a dwelling for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. While he was still making his offer to Jesus, the text says that a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him, I am well pleased.” And then these last three words: “listen to him!”

Are those words familiar to you? With the exception of the last phrase—“listen to him!”—they are identical to the words spoken in Matthew 3 at Jesus’ baptism.

When Peter, James, and John heard the voice from the cloud, they fell on the ground in fear. The next thing they knew was the touch of Jesus and the invitation to stand up and not be afraid. When they looked up, Moses and

Elijah were gone. Matthew says that they saw no one except “Jesus himself alone.”

What a mountain top experience! We know it stayed with Peter because he wrote about it in one of his letters. In 2 Peter, he referred to his day on “the holy mountain.” He wrote that he was an eyewitness to “his majesty.” This day no doubt had a profound impact on Peter, James and John. Yet Jesus told them that they had to go down the mountain, and, worst of all, they couldn’t tell anyone what happened.

Now, what was this event all about? I see three things.

1. This transfiguration experience was for Peter, James, and John a validation of who Jesus was and the means by which he would accomplish the will of God. Peter had it only partly right six days earlier. Yes, Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Messiah, the One for whom they had waited and longed. However, Peter failed to understand his way. Jesus’ way would not be political intrigue and power. It would be the way of the cross, of losing one’s life in order to gain it.
2. The second thing I see here has to do with Moses and Elijah. They were two of the most important figures of Israel’s past. Moses, of course, was the one who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He went up a mountain too, remember. God spoke from a cloud, giving the Torah, the Law. And the prophet Elijah, you may remember, never died. According to 2 Kings he was taken to heaven “by a whirlwind” (2:11). Moses and Elijah were the Law and the prophets, the sources of authority for the people of Israel. But when Peter, James, and John looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone. They were left with “Jesus himself alone.” Moses and Elijah may have been their past, but Jesus was their present and their future. “This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”
3. And then here’s the last thing I see. They had to come down the mountain. As tempting as it may have been to stay and bask in the glory of that mountain top experience, the challenge of faith was at the foot of the mountain, in the mundane, in the routine affairs of life.

Isn't that the message of this text for us? There's nothing wrong with the mundane. Let us not disparage the common routines of life. That's where we live most of the time. The mountain top experiences, as wonderful as they are, are few and far between. So the challenge is to find spiritual delight and joy where we are: going to work or school every day, caring for children, taking care of aging parents, interfacing with a cranky neighbor, etc. Like Peter, James, and John, we come down the mountain, take up our cross, and "listen" to Jesus. Then we face the challenge of living the transfigured life.

Nicholas Herman perfected this. If you're not familiar with Nicholas Herman, I commend him to you. He is better known as Brother Lawrence. His memoir of the devotional life, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, is regarded as a classic now. He was a monk who considered himself "a servant of the servants of God." He worked in the kitchen, cooking, cleaning dishes, serving the other brothers. He did those mundane, routine chores every day until his death at age 80. Sound pretty boring? Rather uninspiring? I would agree. But Brother Lawrence learned to blend work and prayer. He determined that his life would be an experiment of living every moment in "the presence of God." He found that that focus turned the mundane chores of the kitchen into spiritual delight and joy. He wrote this:

*I resolved to give my all for God's all...and I began to live as if there was none but God and I in the world. Sometimes I imagined myself standing before him as a poor criminal at the feet of the judge. At other times I beheld him in my heart as my Father and my God. I worshiped him as often as I could, keeping my mind in his holy presence and recalling it back to God as often as I found it had wandered from him.*

The transfigured life. Living every moment "in the presence of God." Not just the mountain top experiences, but every moment. In the mundane. In the routine. Isn't that our challenge? May God help us to do so.

#### Closing Prayer

O Lord, give us ears to hear and hearts attuned to your ever presence. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.