

Matthew 17:1-9

South Plains

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Mystery and Terror

How shall we confront a mystery? That's the question facing Peter, James and John on the mountain that day when Jesus was transfigured, "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." Most of us have had experiences in the world of nature when the slant of sunlight or the drifting fog transforms an ordinary scene into a fairy tale. Light or darkness can alter perception. I remember a night when my brother had almost finished moving from Southside Richmond to New York City. He couldn't take everything with him, so I helped him store stuff in the attic of the house where I now live. Some of his things are still there. He had one thing that he did not want either in New York or in our attic. It was a queer metal rod about 30 inches long, adorned with withered metal leaves forged around the top and a symbol I did not recognize. He would tell me only that it had been given to him, and he must dispose of it safely. Rain had started to fall as we took the Earlysville road to the reservoir. No traffic was out that late at night so we stopped on the bridge. He opened the car window and flung the thing as far as he could. "Water should keep it from hurting anyone," he said. Was it a wand? An antique scepter from a cult? Something an art student had tried to reproduce, but got wrong? Whatever it was, he wanted no part of it. Perhaps if they ever dredge that reservoir, the mystery will appear again.

I cannot explain that experience. I doubt that Peter, James and John could explain the full significance of Jesus' transfiguration. Nonetheless, they remembered it so vividly that three gospels recorded the bright light from Jesus' face, his dazzling garments, and the appearance of two of the most revered and imposing personalities from Israel's history. Peter tried to make sense of what he saw: Moses, Elijah and Jesus talking together. Moses the liberator from Egypt and lawgiver from Sinai, Elijah the stern prophetic voice of God's judgment on those who broke the law, and then Jesus whose ministry had just been labeled by Peter six days earlier: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter had a very orthodox idea for marking the occasion. Why not build three dwellings or nomadic tents, one for each person, a series of chapels or shrines to commemorate the experience?

We Presbyterians are not much on shrines, but Peter was a Hebrew. The word in the Greek manuscript of the gospel can be translated dwelling, tent or tabernacle. In the Old Testament, it refers to the sanctuary tabernacle in which the children of God kept the Ark of the Covenant as they traveled to the Promised Land. That holy of holies symbolized the Lord's presence with his people. Peter's historical instincts were right on target. But this was not a history lesson Jesus wanted to teach the executive team of his disciples. Knowing the background of Moses and Elijah is necessary information for serious followers, but it is not sufficient to appreciate the mystery of what God was about in the life of Jesus.

God does not stand on ceremony. Before Peter could finish the sentence, he is enveloped by a bright cloud and interrupted by a voice from heaven: Shut up Peter, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Peter was so focused on past glories in Israel's history that he forgot what had happened only six days earlier. You remember that story. Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter correctly answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Right you are, Peter. And, to make sure you don't forget the right answer, here's confirmation from heaven. "This is my Son, the Beloved."

These are exactly the same words spoken at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:17. "This is my Son, the Beloved." The repetition of those words is important to us for a couple of reasons. God is reiterating Jesus' identity. In the beginning of his ministry, people flocked to the master teacher and healer. The crowds continue, but now opposition is showing up more and more regularly. The religious establishment is not pleased with the attention Jesus gets and they are especially peeved that he keeps criticizing them. Today, Jesus' words continue to criticize and hold Christianity accountable to the standards of Moses and the prophets. Like the Pharisees, we get hung up on the details of the law, forgetting the weightier matters of love and justice. If you read our Book of Order and the history of the last few years, you would think Presbyterians must be the most litigious people in the world. I wish we were also famous for our compassion and service. That's one reason we at South Plains have emphasized missions to the needy in our communities and to the world. "This is my Son" calls

us back to the source of our religious rituals, calls us back to the love of God demonstrated in Jesus of Nazareth.

The other reason those words were important for the disciples and are still important for us has to do with the relationship of Jesus to the law and the prophets. Think back on the Sermon on the Mount and how many times in his ministry Jesus said something like, "You have heard it said..., but I say to you." The authority of Jesus is greater than Moses and Elijah. We take this for granted, but for pious followers of Jesus, and especially for the Pharisees and the scribes, these were fighting words. It's similar to someone saying, "The US Constitution says thus and so, but I say something different." Jesus, and now God in heaven is saying, that the words and deeds of Jesus will be the standard for understanding all scripture. We like to grab any verse from the Bible to support our point of view. But we need to subject every verse to the words and deeds of Jesus.

Notice I included the deeds of Jesus as the standard for Christianity. Immediately after Peter's confession of faith, "You are the Christ," Jesus tells his followers that he must suffer and be killed and then raised from the dead. A fork in the road has been reached. Jesus chooses the Jerusalem road deliberately, confronting the culture, piety and traditions of his own people at the very heart of their world. "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." Everything points toward Jerusalem and the cross from now on. Just as everything points toward Lent and Good Friday in the church calendar. It's

important that we listen and look at Jesus, especially in the final chapter of his earthly ministry. What Jesus does will be life-changing. If Peter and the others fail to pay attention, if they allow themselves to be distracted by the hoopla, if they get caught up in the arguments between Jesus and the religious leaders, and if they resent the sadness and the tragedy of the cross so that they turn away, they will miss the crossroads of faith, the meaning of his death, the direction he would have their lives take, and even the full joy of resurrection and eternal life.

Listen to him. Pay attention especially in these weeks leading to the cross. That's the overall significance of Jesus' transfiguration. I have no explanation for how it happened, neither a psychological account of tricks the mind can play on our perception, nor a hypothesis of how the wonders of the natural world can conspire to thrill us with beauty. If someone had whipped out a digital camera to photograph Moses, Elijah and Jesus, I'm not sure the picture would show anyone. This was a revelation of God for Peter, James and John.

Perhaps you have had an experience of God's presence that does not easily fit into a neat explanation. Perhaps you have known a divine mystery. I hope so. We need not be embarrassed or afraid to share it with others. Nor, do we need to defend it. If God truly speaks to us, the only appropriate response is to live a changed life, to accept the identity of Jesus as it's been revealed to us. This particular mystery calls to us follow Jesus to Jerusalem, following him on the path of self-sacrifice and service. One way we follow is throughout the

season of Lent as we worship together around the events of Jesus' last days. Another way gathers us around the Lord's Table as we remember his sacrifice and especially his promise of forgiveness and new life.

This table is for anyone wishing to follow: For the confirmed and knowledgeable believer, for the beginner in faith, for the person aware of his or her sins and fearful of God's judgment, for everyone willing to trust the mystery of Jesus' presence with us at least for a little while this morning. Who knows where it may lead? We know Jesus goes with us.