

The Transfiguration of Our Lord, A ✕ D 2009

Matthew 17:1-9 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. ⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 At the top of Mt. Tabor, as Jesus was transfigured, He appeared in the glory of His divinity, even if only for a passing moment. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. There was no mistaking His deity. This One on the mountain is God. And as if to add credence to that fact, He marshaled Moses and Elijah to stand beside Him as witnesses. Their very presence—Moses as author of the Torah and Elijah as representative of all the Old Testament Prophets—confirmed that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, God-in-the-flesh. And while Peter, James, and John were beholding this spectacular vision, a bright cloud overshadowed them and a Voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." Jesus was blazing with the glory of the Godhead and then the other two persons of the Holy Trinity made an appearance, as well: God the Father as the Voice, and God the Holy Spirit as the Cloud. What a sight!

2 But what a crowd Jesus gathered for the occasion. Couldn't Jesus have found some better representatives of His People than these five? Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John: what a bunch of losers!

3 Moses, murdering Moses, is a far cry from a faithful Israelite. When the oppression of the Israelites stressed Moses out and when deliverance from the God of Israel seemed not to come, he took matters into his own hands and murdered an Egyptian. When the God of Israel called Moses to be the one through whom the Lord would work to deliver His people from Egyptian slavery, Moses had no shortage of excuses and reasons the Lord should pick someone else. When the Israelites grumbled against Moses, he was quick to complain against the Lord instead of calling the Israelites to repent of their grumbling and their sins that landed them in the wilderness in the first place. And Moses, for all the times of his reasonable leadership, for all their grumbling he put up with, never entered the Promised Land. Moses distrusted the power of God's word. And, when the Lord commanded Moses to speak to the rock so that it might give water to drink to the Israelites,

Moses assumed just a word wouldn't be enough, so he struck the rock with his staff. Yes, Moses wanted to do things his own way.

4 How's Elijah any better? When pursued by Jezebel, fearing for his life, Elijah fled into the wilderness and hid under a tree. There he pled with the Lord to take his life. Elijah was filled with despair, assuming the Lord wasn't taking care of His prophet. "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." But the Lord reproved Elijah. There are seven thousand who have not bent the knee to Baal. Don't be so foolish, so self-centered, so doubting Elijah.

5 And the disciples Jesus brought with Him up the mountain are no more faithful Israelites. Peter—yes, Peter who made the bold confession "You are the Christ the Son of the living God"—immediately before today's Gospel reading was rebuked by Jesus. When Peter opposed Jesus' journey towards the cross to give up His life in the place of sinners, Jesus rebuked him, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of men. That's the Peter Jesus chose to bring to witness His transfiguration? The same Peter who would—on the morning of His crucifixion—deny the Lord three times is the Peter gathered by the Lord for the transfiguration. And James and John? They thought themselves so important that they had mom come to Jesus to ask if they might have the places of honor to the right and left of Jesus when He came into His kingdom. Some representatives of the apostles these three are: arrogant, self-important, self-serving.

6 What a bunch of losers they are. What a loser you are, too. How is Moses' doubting the power of the Word of God any different from your doubting God's Word's power by your neglect of daily Bible reading and prayer? How is Elijah's despair, his asking the Lord to take his life, any different from your despair, from your prideful assumption that the suffering the Lord lets your life contain is unfair? How is Peter any different from you, who deny the Lord with your sinful life? How are James and John any more sinful than you who think of yourself far more highly (and more often) than you ought? If you think you're not a loser, if you think that you might somehow earn the Lord's favor, consider the mountain on which Moses stood in the Old Testament reading. On Sinai, the Lord delivered to His people His Ten Commandments. And all the Commandments do to you is accuse you and point out your failures: loser. Repent.

7 Take comfort in the crowd of losers Jesus gathered to Himself atop Tabor. That's the point of the transfiguration. From this mountain to another, the disciples descended with the Lord Jesus. The display of His glory is not to shame these men for their failings, but to give them comfort. "Rise and have no fear." So Jesus descended from the mountain toward Mt. Calvary. His display of divinity at His transfiguration is to prove that He is no less God at His crucifixion. He whose face shone with the brilliance of the sun, whose clothes were whiter and more brilliant than anything else, could have made a similar display of His divinity at Mt. Calvary. The garments that once glowed white were divided by the soldiers who cast lots for them. The face that shone with the glory of the sun was spat upon and struck with soldiers' fists. Since Jesus had already displayed His power at His transfiguration, He could have stopped these assaults, too. But He didn't. This One who proved His divinity at the transfiguration proved His love for losers like you, losers unable to keep even one commandment perfectly, at His crucifixion.

8 You who were defeated at Mt. Sinai were delivered at Mt. Calvary. And you who were delivered at Mt. Calvary, whose sins were taken away by the sinless Son of God, have been destined for Mt. Zion. There, God dwells with those who otherwise would be lost. Rise and have no fear. Your sins do not condemn you. They condemned Jesus instead.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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