

Transfigured

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[0:00] Good morning. Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season in the church calendar where we focus on Jesus' life, His ministry, His revelation to the world.

It is right before the season of Lent. It starts on Wednesday with Ash Wednesday, the season where we remember Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness, this 40-day season that prepares us for Holy Week and Easter.

And the ancient wisdom of the church has seen fit for us to focus on the last week of Epiphany on something called the Transfiguration.

On the Transfiguration. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all three of them record this scene. They record this moment in their Gospel accounts.

And so it seems, at least for them, it seems like this is a pretty important moment if all three of them record it. And as I was studying our text for this week, I kept asking why.

[1:09] Why is the Transfiguration important? Not just why is it in the church calendar, but why does it matter? Why does it matter for our theology? Why does it matter for our lives?

And I was thinking about the question this way. I mean, if it didn't happen, we would still have Jesus' life, His death, His resurrection, His ascension.

We would have the full Gospel, right? So why do we need this story? Why do we need the Transfiguration? What's the big deal? Why put it in the church calendar? And also, if you just, it's kind of an odd story, honestly.

Perhaps you picked that up as Hillary read the Gospel. It's a bit of an odd story. I think that if you asked the average person on the street, what is the Transfiguration?

They would probably look at you with a blank stare, or they probably think that you're referring to something in Harry Potter or the Twilight series. And so we're gonna ask two simple questions this morning about the Transfiguration.

[2:14] What happened and why does it matter? What happened in the Transfiguration and why does it matter for the disciples and why does it matter for us today? So first of all, what happened in the Transfiguration?

In the beginning of Matthew chapter 17, our Gospel passage, Jesus leads Peter, James, and John on a hike up a mountain. And I want you to imagine what it would have been like to be in their shoes.

They're hanging out with Jesus, and he says, all right guys, it's time to go for a climb, time to go for a hike up this mountain. And they say, all right, great, let's go.

Let me grab my hiking boots. I'm gonna grab my Garmin watch so I can track this hike on Strava. I'm excited to get some steps in. I'm excited to, when we get to the top, see a nice view.

More importantly, just excited to spend some quality time with Jesus. You know, away from the crowds, away from the other disciples. It's kind of a unique, privileged time. They're probably thinking as they start the climb, as they start the ascent, probably start thinking what they're gonna do when they get to the top.

[3:24] Perhaps when we get to the top, Jesus is gonna do some teaching. He likes to do that sort of thing. Maybe we'll have a little prayer time. And hopefully, have some time for lunch.

That's what I would be thinking if I was going up mountain with Jesus. But when they get to the top, none of the things that they are expecting or imagining happen.

Instead, they experience something totally unpredictable, totally unexpected, totally shocking and extraordinary. The first thing that they see is they see Jesus surrounded and illuminated with overwhelming glory.

With overwhelming glory. Verse two says that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. I love the way that Mark describes it in his account of this scene.

Mark says his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. Luke says that his appearance and his clothes were like a flash of lightning.

[4:39] This is Jesus in overwhelming glory. It reminds us of the words of Psalm 104. Verses one and two. Oh Lord my God, you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

The Lord wraps himself in light. Wraps himself in light as with a garment. New Testament scholar R.T. France in his commentary on Matthew puts it like this.

The disciples saw the same Jesus, but now with an awesome brightness like the sun. Or we might better say that the dark dullness of earthly conditions were stripped away.

So that the true nature of Jesus could be clearly seen. I love that. The dullness of the earthly conditions were stripped away so that they could see the true nature of Jesus. For a brief moment, the veil of Jesus' humanity is pulled back.

And the disciples see Jesus clothed in the awesome splendor and majesty and power of his glory. But that's not all they see. That's not where the scene ends.

[5:45] In verse three, we see that just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. I would love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Moses and Elijah are these two prominent Old Testament figures.

Moses is the one who led Israel out of Egypt, out of slavery, into the Promised Land. He received the law as a covenant mediator, a covenant representative of God's people.

And Elijah in the Book of First Kings is a prophet. He was a prophet who spoke to God's people on God's behalf. And both Moses and Elijah are prominent figures because they had these unique and special experiences of God's glory in the Old Testament that no one else got to experience.

Some people call this a theophany. A theophany. Both of them had this experience of God's presence and glory. Where? On top of a mountain. On top of a mountain.

Same mountain, in fact. Mount Sinai. And in our Old Testament passage this morning that Gregor read, Exodus 24, we see this scene where God meets Moses on top of Mount Sinai in a cloud of fire and smoke and thunder.

[7:04] It's an awesome experience. In 1 Kings chapter 19, Elijah goes up the same mountain many years later and he experiences a wind, a great wind, a great fire, a great earthquake.

But God was not in the wind. He was not in the fire. He was not in the earthquake. Where was he? He was in a still, small voice. Moses and Elijah had these theophanies, these unique experiences of God's glory.

And they together represent God's presence, His word and His revelation to His people. You can think of Moses as representing the law and Elijah representing the prophets.

The law and the prophets is actually a shorthand way of referring to the entire Old Testament, the entire Old Testament story. It's actually a shorthand that Jesus Himself used many times, the law and the prophets.

And so what the disciples saw on top of this mountain is two prominent Old Testament figures, two heroes of the faith who experienced God's glory and power and who mediated God's presence and word to His people.

[8:24] Standing in the presence of someone who is so clearly much greater. than them. Two people who represent the law and the prophets standing with someone whose power and authority and glory stands far above the law and the prophets.

Consider for a moment when Moses goes up the mountain, Mount Sinai, to meet with the Lord in the cloud of glory. When Moses, we see later in Exodus when he comes down the mountain, we learn that Moses' face was radiating with light.

It was almost as if the divine glory that he experienced sort of rubbed off on him. Sort of as the moon reflects the light of the sun, Moses' face was reflecting the glory of God as he came down the mountain after encountering God's glory.

The face of Jesus was shining too, but the face, Jesus' face wasn't shining by reflecting divine glory.

Jesus' face was shining with his own glory. As great as Moses and Elijah are, as important and prominent as they are in the story of God's people, someone greater, someone more important is here.

[9:49] And it's in this moment of incredible encounter with God's glory that Peter has a really great idea.

Verse 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, one for Elijah.

You gotta love Peter, right? You just gotta love the guy. I mean, I think that in a lot of ways, Peter reminds me of Dwight Schrute from The Office. He's got a lot of energy. He's quick to speak, quick to act, quick to get the job done, but often doesn't go super well.

Here's what I think is amazing. He's got two friends with him, James and John. And what does he say? I will put up three shelters for you. I will do this. You gotta give Peter credit for showing initiative, right?

Some commentators suggest that Peter is thinking here about the Feast of Tabernacles, this Old Testament feast. Week-long celebration where people constructed these temporary shelters called booths as a reminder of God's provision for them in the wilderness.

[11:06] And perhaps he's thinking about this, but whether he's thinking about the Feast of Tabernacles or not, it's clear that Peter recognizes an opportunity. He recognizes that something unique, special is happening, and he wants to say to everybody, hey guys, let's extend the moment.

Let's keep this going. Let's prolong this mountaintop experience for as long as possible. Though Peter's idea was probably well-intentioned, it was also seriously misguided.

We know this, and I love this. We know this because while Peter is still speaking, while the words are still coming out of his mouth, another voice interrupts him. Verse 5, verses 5-8.

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. Listen to him. All throughout the Old Testament, the cloud of glory was this physical sign of God's presence and his glory to come and dwell with his people.

[12:25] And the same God who spoke to Moses in the cloud of glory on Mount Sinai, the same God who led Israel through the wilderness with the cloud of glory by day and the pillar of fire by night, is the same God who is speaking here.

And if you remember, these are actually the same words that God the Father speaks over Jesus in his baptism. This is my son.

This is my son, whom I love, and with him I am well-pleased. Only this time, he adds another line. Listen to him.

Listen to him. Verse 6. When the disciples heard this, they fell face down on the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them.

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. Before we wrap up this scene, I just want to pause and notice one more thing about Jesus. How is it that the God of the smoke and the fire and the thunder with Moses in Exodus 24, how is it that that God is also the same God in 1 Kings 19, the still small voice with Elijah?

[13:47] God of glory and also a God of tenderness. God of goodness. I think we get a clue to an answer in this scene because Jesus in this moment shows us both his incredible glory and also his incredible grace.

incredible grace. One minute, Jesus is radiating with cosmic light and brilliance and glory, and the next minute, he's kneeling down and he's touching Peter and James and John on the shoulder and saying, hey guys, don't be afraid, don't be afraid.

This is an incredible picture of Jesus. He is full of majesty, full of splendor, full of glory, and also incredibly full of tenderness and gentleness and love.

This is Jesus in the transfiguration. It's an incredible story, and it's an incredible scene to unpack. That leads to our second question, why does it matter?

Why does the transfiguration matter? Why did it matter for the disciples, and why does it matter for us today? We're gonna look at three things. The transfiguration matters because it authenticates Jesus' identity, it clarifies Jesus' mission, and it previews our own transformation.

[15:14] It authenticates Jesus' identity, it clarifies his mission, and it previews our own transformation. So first of all, transfiguration authenticates Jesus' identity.

You know, multiple times a day, I think a lot of us perform an annoying little ritual that has become somewhat of a daily essential activity to our lives.

I'm talking about, of course, about two-factor authentication. You log into your phone, or your bank account, or your email inbox, and a message pops up.

Not so fast. Not so fast. First, you have to prove who you say you are. You have to prove you're not an AI bot or a scammer trying to steal someone's identity or money, and so you get a code texted to your phone, or perhaps you have to answer a security question, or pick which boxes have the motorcycle on them, to prove that you are who you say you are, because no one but you, no one but you could type that passcode into the box, and no one but you, no one but you would know the name of your first pet.

No one but you would know the name of the street that you grew up on. The transfiguration is Jesus' two-factor authentication, to say that he is who he says he is.

[16:42] He's not just another spiritual leader. He's not just another religious teacher of the law. He's not just one more in the long line of prophets equal to Moses and Elijah. In fact, he is everything that the law and the prophets point to.

He is the very fulfillment of the entire Old Testament story. He is the anointed one. He's the Messiah. He is the king who is coming to reign in his rightful place.

No one but him could be transformed with that kind of glory. No one but him could stand in the name of the Lord.

No one but him could stand as the superior to Moses and Elijah. No one but him could call forth the voice of God the Father, this is my son.

Jesus really is who he says he is. And for Peter and the other disciples, this was an important moment, not only for that present moment, but it was a moment that they could look back later in their life as a moment that confirmed Jesus' identity.

[17:55] Perhaps when things were hard or when their faith was being tested or perhaps when they started to doubt or when they felt like giving up, it would have given them perseverance in their faith.

It would have given them boldness in proclaiming the good news about Jesus even in the midst of opposition and persecution. Listen to how Peter, later in his ministry, listen to how Peter himself reflects on the significance of this moment in 2 Peter 1, verses 16 through 18.

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power. But we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the majestic glory saying, This is my son whom I love, and with him I am well pleased.

We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. This is a core memory for Peter.

[19:04] And friends, if you're here this morning and you're not sure what you think about Jesus, or not sure what you believe about him, number one question, the number one question that you can answer in your life is this, is Jesus who he really is, is Jesus really who he says he is?

And your answer to that question is the most important question that you can answer, because if he's not, then believe whatever you want to believe, live however you want to live.

But if Jesus is who he says he is, then there is only one way to respond. To listen to the authenticating voice of God the Father speaking to us, This is my son.

Listen to him. Listen to him. Whatever voices we listen to, whatever people or thought leaders or political leaders or podcasts or social media influencers, writers, whatever other voices we listen to, there is one voice that we must listen to above all the rest.

And it's the voice of Jesus, because he is who he says he is. So first of all, the transfiguration matters because it authenticates Jesus' identity. The second thing for why the transfiguration matters is that it clarifies Jesus' mission.

[20:35] Clarifies his mission. All three accounts of the transfiguration have right before this scene, Jesus telling his disciples the same thing.

That he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, to be betrayed and rejected and to be killed. And that whoever wants to follow him must take up their cross, deny themselves and follow him.

And this is why Peter's plan needs some correction. We can appreciate Peter's heart. We can appreciate his motivation. He recognizes that God is doing something special and he wants to keep it going.

But the problem is that Peter wants the mountaintop experience without having to bear his cross. He wants, Peter wants glory without suffering.

You know, sometimes the Lord is kind enough in our lives to bring us mountaintop experiences. Perhaps it's a moving and powerful time of worship.

[21:39] Perhaps it's a powerful time of prayer. Maybe this happens in church on a Sunday or at a retreat or at a summer camp when we're young or on a mission trip.

Maybe even we experience something like a miraculous healing. I mean, I remember having experiences when I was a teenager in middle school and high school and college at camps and at retreats when I remember having incredibly powerful times of worship.

Encountering the Lord. Experiencing his presence in a deep way. And still to this day, they're a reminder that God's presence is real and tangible.

But they always came to an end. We always had to go back to normal, ordinary life. And that's by design. It's by design.

Mountaintop experiences are good. They're a gift from the Lord, but they're never meant to stay on the mountaintop. They're meant to empower us to take up our crosses and to follow Jesus into greater mission in the world.

[22:51] It's incredible if you read, if you continue reading, if you just read what happens after this scene, they go down the mountain and immediately, immediately Jesus is confronted with physical and spiritual need.

A father comes to Jesus crying out for help because his son is being oppressed by a demonic spirit. And Jesus brings transformation into his son's life.

He rebukes the demonic spirit. He heals him and transforms him. Yes, Jesus is coming from glory and he's going to glory.

But he is going to get there through the cross. The transfiguration gives Jesus an opportunity to clarify his mission, both for his disciples and for us, that his mission isn't to gather a people to withdraw from the world and to be a holy huddle.

But to gather a people who give themselves for the world, just like he did. A people who deny themselves, who take up their crosses and follow him into places of great physical and spiritual need.

[24:02] And as a church, I think it's important to say that we should be hungry and eager for mountaintop experiences.

We should be hungry to encounter the Lord in worship. To be renewed in our love and affection for Jesus. To have deep experiences of the Holy Spirit. Even to see God do miraculous things.

We should be hungry for that. But we should always remember that God uses these experiences in our lives to send us back out on mission. To take up our cross and to give ourselves for the life of the world.

A world full of physical and spiritual need. So the transfiguration authenticates Jesus' identity. It clarifies his mission. Thirdly, finally, it previews our own transformation.

It previews our own transformation. With a lot of movies now on streaming, a lot of people these days, including myself, don't go to the movie theaters as often.

[25:07] Movie theater attendance is basically in decline across the board. But honestly, it's kind of an experience that I sort of miss. One of my favorite parts of going to the movies was actually watching the previews.

Watching trailers. I'm the person who wanted to get there in time to be able to watch all the previews. The previews are these short glimpses. They're these tastes of the movies that are coming out next month or next year.

And in many ways, this is what the transfiguration is. It's a trailer. It's a preview. It's a brief glimpse into the coming attractions. And it shows us a glimpse.

It shows us a preview of the future glory of Jesus. In all three Gospel accounts just before this scene, Jesus also tells his disciples that one day he is going to come again in power and glory with his angels to judge the world and to bring his kingdom in his fullness.

The veil one day will finally be torn all the way back. And the glory of Jesus will be fully revealed. Not just for a select few on top of a mountain, but for the whole world to see.

[26:21] And Jesus will be revealed as the Son of Man, as the rightful King, and as the judge of all the earth. And depending on how we respond to Jesus in this life, this is a day of great dread and great terror.

Or it's a day of great hope. Or it's a day of great hope. For those who have trusted Jesus to be their Lord and Savior, the transfiguration not only previews the coming glory of Jesus, but it previews our own glory.

Consider 1 John 3, verse 2, it says it like this, when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Those who are united to Jesus have the hope of being transformed into the same glory that he possesses. And you may say, well that sounds great, that sounds awesome for the future, but what does that mean for the present?

What does that mean for my life today? And the answer is everything. It has everything to do with your life today. The good news of Jesus, the good news of the Gospel isn't that Jesus forgives us our sins and sends us on our way.

[27:47] It's that he intends, from start to finish, to transform us into beings who are like him. Glorious beyond comparison.

To make us people who are physically and spiritually radiant. To make us into people whose beauty and whose splendor outshines the stars.

And this process of transformation into glory is what Jesus is doing in us right now through the Holy Spirit. Consider the way that Paul writes about this in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18.

And we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory.

Which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Did you catch that? What is the Holy Spirit doing in you? He is transforming you into someone who has ever increasing glory.

[29:03] That is what God is doing in your life. And I believe that we live in a time, and I believe that we live in a cultural moment, where lots of people are desperate and hungry for a message of transformation.

If you pay attention to the popular books that people read, if you pay attention to the podcasts that people listen to, the social media accounts that people follow, the YouTube channels that people watch.

I think a lot of people in our cultural moment know that something is deeply wrong, not just out there in the world, but they know that something is deeply wrong within them, and they're searching. They're longing for real change. They're longing for real transformation and healing. And perhaps that's you here this morning.

Perhaps that is the, one of the great longings of your heart. And I think one of the problems is that the, oftentimes the predominant message of our culture is that transformation happens primarily by looking inward.

[30:17] By looking inward at yourself. Find your true self. Look within. Behold the glory within you. And you will be transformed. But scripture offers us a better message.

It offers us a more powerful, a more compelling message. It offers us a transfiguration message for the world. It's a message of both present and future transformation.

Yes, transformation and change are possible, and they, it is attainable. But not by looking inside yourself. Don't look within yourself to be transformed.

Behold the glory of Jesus. And his beauty, his majesty, his power. Behold the glory of Jesus, and you will be transformed.

From one degree of glory to another. We are transformed by beholding Jesus.

[31:29] And all the transformation that we experience in this life is like a trailer. It's a preview. It's a, it's a foretaste. It's a dim, dim shadow of who God ultimately intends us to be.

Beings who are like Jesus. Transfigured. Transformed. Glorious beyond comparison.

And friends, this is why the transfiguration matters. It matters because it authenticates Jesus' identity. It shows us that he really is who he says he is. It clarifies his mission that his path to glory is through the cross.

And so is ours. And finally, it previews our own transformation that we are destined for incomprehensible glory. A little over a hundred years ago in 1918, there was a poet and a hymn writer named Helen Lemel.

And one day, Helen Lemel was standing on a street corner when someone handed her a little pamphlet written by a woman named Lilius Trotter, who was a missionary to Algeria.

[32:48] And some of you are familiar with her story. And Helen Lemel starts reading this essay by Trotter. And Trotter begins the essay by describing this experience that she had one morning, observing a dandelion in the woods as the sun was coming up over the horizon.

And Trotter tells about this experience and she says, just as the sun was coming up over the horizon, in the corner of my eye, there shone out a great golden star.

It was a dandelion. And it was half withered. But it was full face to the sun. And it had caught into its heart all of the glory that it could hold.

And it was shining so radiantly that it seemed to be telling us something. That if Jesus, the son of righteousness, has risen in our hearts, then there is an ocean of grace and love and power lying all around us.

An ocean to which all of the earthly light is but a drop. And it is ready to transfigure us as the sunshine transfigured the dandelion.

[34:15] And standing on a street corner, Helen Lemel was moved. She was gripped by this vision of transformation in Christ.

And it led her to write these words of a hymn that may be familiar to some of us. Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of the earth will grow strangely dim. In the light of his glory and grace.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, thank you that you give us a vision of the glory of your son. We pray that we would hear your voice speaking to us this morning.

Would you transform us into your own glory? Lord, would you give us a vision for who you've made us to be?

[35:25] People like you with ever increasing glory. Pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen.