

Transfigured

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. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. 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." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. 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."

Our annual calendars are filled with dates and holidays on a spectrum that ranges from the historical to the traditional to the sentimental and personal. There are also observances and days targeted to just a narrow slice of our population. We can hardly imagine a year without New Year's Day, the 4th of July, Labor Day, or Thanksgiving. Other so-called national holidays are not so widely embraced. Grandparents Day is meaningful only if you have one or you are one. If you missed observing Groundhog Day, the sun still rose the next day. If you never even found out that there was a national "Talk Like a Pirate Day," somehow, life would manage to go on. Aye matey? Blow me down!

So the people of God mark their calendars. Some of the days are in red letters and large, bold type. Christmas – the birthday party for the newborn Prince of Peace. Easter – the victory party over sin, death, and the devil. Pentecost – the birthday of the New Testament Church with the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Christian church festivals quickly start dropping off into the category of the unknown or the comparatively unimportant. All days, all holidays, and all celebrations are not equally honored.

Now we recognize that one of the most important characteristics about God is that he loves

all. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son. Yes, God loves all, but the Scriptures show that he loves some even more than others. Our God seems to have had a special place in his heart for Moses, and David and Elijah.

And even Jesus had friends in whom he found a special joy in their friendship. Peter, James and John were the closest friends Jesus had. They spent more time with them than with others. A special relationship grew and matured because he spent time with them. We know that from our relationships, too. Our closest friendships often develop with those we spend a lot of time with. We come to know them, and they come to know us. And so it was with Jesus. He brings his closest friends to a mountaintop for a mountaintop experience.

Without warning, Jesus' face shown like the sun. In an age that did not know high pressure lights or mirrors that gather and focus the light of the sun, it must have been a startling thing to behold.

The clothes Jesus wore were as white as light. It was always difficult for the ancients to get natural fibers spun into yarn which was spun into cloth to appear light, much less white. What Peter, James and John saw that day was striking and unforgettable.

It would have been an extraordinary day if nothing else had happened, but there was still more. Moses and Elijah both appear. There are no more significant figures among the believers who had lived under the covenant of God. Moses was God's mouthpiece and instrument as leader and transmitter of the law. Elijah was a miracle worker and the greatest of the prophets. There they are, on the top of the mountain, talking with Jesus.

Moses might have remarked how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is in the process of keeping God's law perfectly, as a requirement of God's justice, and as a substitute for you having to do it, and me, too. Elijah may have remarked about the prophecies that Jesus had been fulfilling, and the ones that still remained unfulfilled which Jesus must do. Together they may have spoken about how human beings respond to the word of God – how they are blessed when they hear the Word of God and keep it, and how difficult and dangerous it is to ignore the way and will of God and instead, follow your own path. They may have spoken about how important it is for the people of God to

be nourished by a healthy balance of Law and Gospel.

The day's events are not nearly over, but Peter doesn't know that.

Peter is thrilled beyond description at what he has already seen, and does something quite 21st century American. He proposes building a tourist site. He suggests building something from stones or bricks or wood – some kind of a memorial, so that in the future they will always be able to find the same spot and recall the glorious things that happened.

Before the three followers can slide two stones together, there are more very special effects. God's voice from heaven affirms Jesus and his role. This is my son whom I love, with whom I am well pleased. We know Jesus to be out prophet, priest, and king. Up to this point in his life, it is the role of prophet that is most obvious. He is teaching and explaining, day after day. He is applying the truth of God to the issues that come up at home and work. He is pointing out how his life and ministry fulfills all prophecy and brings comfort to the afflicted, while he afflicts the comfortable.

God the Father urges all to listen to him. His words are life, and even though we may like some of his words more than others, we should not use selective hearing, as is our custom. We tune out the messages we don't care to hear. The Father would have us, not only listen to him, but take his words to heart. We are to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. We need to hear the words and teaching of Jesus and take it within, and make it part of us. It is not just the Father's advice – it is the Father's command. Jesus is not, as the Moslems say, just one of the great prophets, He is the son of God from eternity whose words give life and hope.

This whole event on the mountain is related in just a few sentences, which do not do it justice. What happened that day overwhelmed the three mortal men who were witnesses to it all. The disciples fell on their faces terrified at the voice of God. They were intrigued by the appearance of Moses and Elijah. They were terrified upon hearing the voice of God. It wasn't just different. It wasn't just louder. It was terrifying.

But Jesus hasn't stopped caring for the three men he invited. Jesus knows the voice which had just spoken, and so Jesus speaks words of comfort. "Don't be afraid."

I've heard that sentence before. I heard it when I was six and lightning hit the utility pole in

our alley and the lights went off instantly. I heard the sentence from my mother. I wasn't afraid immediately. In fact, for a while it was fun. But four hours later, it wasn't so much fun, when the house started to get cold and everything electric stood silent and still and dark.

"Don't be afraid." I spoke that sentence to my children years ago when we learned that a burglar had broken into a house down the block and stolen things while our neighbors were in the house. I tried to speak the sentence convincingly, but I'm not sure my children felt secure again for many months. Matthew writes that when Jesus said the words, he must have been much more reassuring than you or I could ever be.

After several minutes or hours, the special guests, Moses and Elijah are done, while Jesus remains. Peter, James, and John didn't get the short end of the bargain. Jesus was still with them, and as awesome as Moses and Elijah were, they weren't in Jesus' league.

As they come down from the mountaintop, as everyone must do, Jesus gives the command to keep the event confidential until after the resurrection. Wouldn't you know it? Something really juicy, something absolutely spectacular happens that you would like to shout about and brag about being there, and you are sworn to secrecy!

But then again, this is an unusual event. This is not nursery school stuff. This is life in the big leagues. This is hard stuff to explain. Jesus knows that there's a right time to reveal the hard stuff, as the Spirit of God gives wisdom and perspective. The minute they get home was not the time. God's time would come. Sometimes we have to guess when God's right time is, but not for Peter, James and John -- not this time. They can spill the beans after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Right. After what? That sentence must have been ringing in their ears for weeks.

So where does this event fit, in the calendar of Christian holidays, festivals, and major events? What did it mean for the people who were there? What has it meant for the believers who heard the story from Peter, James and John? What does it mean for all the followers of Jesus who have read about this rather mysterious ever since? Peter walked with Jesus for about a thousand days. Thirty years after Jesus ascended into heaven, Peter was still thinking about, and writing, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what he witnessed on

the mountain that day. If you're anything like me, you can't remember what you had for dinner last night, but there are a few things that happened 30 years ago that I can still remember clearly, and God has designed our brains and our memories so that the really important things are not lost to us, and since they're not lost to us, they're available to others.

Peter wrote in his second letter:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For 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; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

What happened that day was still on Peter's mind 30 years later. It not only impressed him, it convinced him. It not only inspired him, it had a part in making him a different kind of disciple – a disciple who would listen to the words of Jesus, who would cease to be afraid because Jesus comforted him.

A little-known and seldom celebrated event can have the same effect on us. Based on what happened on the mountain that day – but not only on that one day – we can honestly and genuinely conclude that we can benefit enormously and eternally from listening to the words of Jesus – his words of law, and his words of forgiveness, acceptance, and sacrificial love. We can hear his words of comfort urging us not to be afraid, and by the grace of God, take them to heart and live our lives in his grace and care.

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