**The Transfiguration of Christ**

Matthew 16:28-17:13

Key Verse: 2

“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”

Last week, we learned from the previous passage how Jesus asked his disciples a simple, but critical question: “Who do you say I am?” It was then that they made this historic confession of faith, answering, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Matthew notes that it was from this moment on that Jesus began to teach his disciples that as messiah, he had to ***“…go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (16:21)*** Jesus also taught that everyone who would follow him should imitate his life of faith and holy mission of suffering and sacrifice for the glory of God. But it became very clear that the disciples had a terrible problem, which if left unresolved, would hinder the work of God in them, making them unable to answer God’s calling in their own lives. Jesus disciples were still very much afraid of death; they did not want to suffer. Even more, worldly glory still seemed much more appealing to them than suffering for the sake of Jesus. We see this when Peter took Jesus aside to rebuke him for speaking about suffering. The good shepherd Jesus knew that he had to do something to help his disciples overcome their fear in order to fulfill their life mission, of which God called them to; and he is also calling all of us to follow in the same way. So Jesus promised them saying, ***“I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” (16:28)***

Now, we’re going to see how Jesus fulfills this promise to his disciples when he takes three of them up on a high mountain; he then becomes fully transfigured before them. The word “transfigure” means “to change figure.” So when the bible says Jesus was transfigured, it means that Jesus no longer looked like an ordinary man; instead he looked divine. First, before we talk about Jesus’ transfiguration, who were these three disciples Jesus chose to take with him? Let’s take a look at **verse 1** and read together, ***“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.”*** These were ordinary men; yet Jesus recognized that even with his disciples, there was a sort of spiritual order among them. Peter (the rock), James and John (the Sons of Thunder) were some of the more influential ones among the disciples, and they had a closer, more personal relationship with Jesus. The group would often look to one of these three to know how to react in certain situations, and for directions in Jesus’ absence. It was these three that Jesus chose to reveal his glory at that moment. He really wanted to strengthen them so that their faith may not fail. He also entrusted them with the great responsibility of strengthening and encouraging their brothers at the right time, and when persecution came.

Let’s read ***verse 2,*** ***“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”*** When the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, they saw the glory of the kingdom of God. His face shined so bright, it was like looking at the sun; even his clothes, as ragged as they were became as bright as light to them. For the first time ever, the disciples saw Jesus as he truly is, clothed in all his heavenly glory. Just being in his presence at the time must have been absolutely overwhelming for them. Yet we must remember it was absolutely imperative that they saw Jesus as he truly is. For as long as they had known Jesus, they only saw a man who looked constantly exhausted, battered and beaten-up from the demands of ministry [work]. Everywhere he went, crowds would follow him. They accosted him with their constant needs and unending desires; the crowds were like little children— constantly seeking their parent’s attention. Yet Jesus never turned anyone away. He loved them and served them with all his heart. Jesus would rarely get moments to himself, and even when he did, he’d used that time and opportunity to turn to his father in prayer.

Jesus gave so much of himself that his family thought he was crazy and tried to force him to eat and get some rest. On top of it all, Jesus was constantly harassed by the religious leaders who were always trying to discredit him; and undermined what he did in front of everybody. The disciples expected a messiah who would destroy all his adversaries. And rather than calling down angels to wipe away his attackers, Jesus bore with them also and tried to help them. Then, as we read last week, Jesus taught that he must suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders. This must have been too much for the disciples to handle. The prophet Isaiah said this about Jesus, ***“…He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem” (Isa 53:2-3).*** When they looked with their natural eyes, the disciples did not see anything humanly attractive in Jesus. He didn’t exactly fit the mold. Jesus did not look like the messiah they had imagined.

Though, we praise God because he was doing great things with the disciples, and transforming their hearts. Even still, they had many false images from the world that they needed to get rid of in their hearts. Many people carry around all sorts of false images in their hearts. It’s practically impossible to escape the various images the world presents. In this materialistic world, it’s easy for anyone to believe the distorted images we see in the world –even Christians, if we aren’t careful. We are constantly bombarded with images like the rich and powerful controlling the world, or the poor and the humble being insignificant or unimportant. Images of broken families, images of an unfaithful spouse, have all become normal. We see images of children growing up without ever knowing the love of a father or mother. There are so many images of sorrow and suffering and despair and ungodliness; images in this world, which blinds us from seeing God; images that cloud the truth of God and drives the heart to unending bitterness, fear and despair. The only image powerful enough to dispel every other image in our hearts and help us stand daily against the assault of the world, and on the truth of God’s word is the image of Jesus Christ, transfigured in all his glory. We need to open the eyes of our hearts, by faith, and gaze upon Christ who shines brighter than the sun.

For this very reason, the disciples also needed to have the vision of the transfigured Christ, and to see him with their very own eyes. They needed to see the kingdom of God with their hearts. Generally, when people think about the kingdom of God, they think about great and magnificent buildings; they think about beauty and things look brilliant; they think about ease and comfort and happiness and joy. Hardly do we ever stop to think about the Son of God on his throne in heaven, filled with the glory and honor from his Father; yet for our sake he leaves behind his throne in heaven, and humbled himself and ***“…made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:7).*** But when Jesus was transformed, he no longer looked haggardly, like a suffering shepherd. Rather, he looked glorious and majestic and mighty, just as he looks on his throne in heaven. Jesus wanted his disciples to remember this forever, so that while they too would suffer in their bodies as they lived their lives of faith and holy mission, Satan might not be able to discourage them. So too, Jesus wants us to hold on to this image in our own hearts to drive away any images Satan plants in our hearts, which binds us to live a nominal Christian existence. May the image of Christ transfigured, in all his heavenly glory, drive away any images we still hold in our hearts that hinders us from living according to God’s purpose.

Let’s now take a look at verse 3, “Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.” This was an intimate moment for Jesus. He was fully transfigured before his disciples that they might see the kingdom of heaven, in the presence of his Father. Why, at this moment, did God choose send his two servants to meet with and talk with Jesus? Both Moses and Elijah were two of the greatest servants in God’s history. Luke’s account of the story reveals that they spoke to Jesus about his death that was soon to come (Lk. 9:31). God sent Moses and Elijah to converse with Jesus about his inevitable suffering and death. But why? Moses and Elijah were both God’s servant who were very familiar with suffering in their lifetime, as shepherds for God’s people. Moses struggled very much in helping his people to overcome their slave mentality and he suffered as he tried to help them start their new life living in obedience to the word of God. Elijah also suffered much as he ran from the queen who persecuted him, and struggled to rescue the people of God from their sinful worship of idols, to worshipping the One True God. Because they were very familiar with the suffering Christ himself had to endure, God knew that out of all his servants in history, these two would serve best in ministering to Jesus during his hour of need. There were none more qualified than these two, who would encourage Jesus to suffer for the glory of God. As the moment drew near, God knew that Jesus would need support. These two would remind Jesus of the father’s love not only for him, but for the whole world. Moses and Elijah would encourage him to remain faithful; that he MUST glorify God, and go to the cross for sake of the world, and even for them. In the world, most friends would not comfort their friend by encouraging them to suffer, but these friends stood on the truth of God, and encouraged Jesus to fulfill God’s mission in his life. How precious it is to know that even when our Lord Jesus needed encouragement, he turned to God; and now, because of Jesus, we too can turn to God in difficult times –in moments of deep anguish and suffering.

Moving to ***verse 4***, we see how the disciples responded to all that was happening. Let’s read it together, ***“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.”*** What was going on with Peter at this moment? Luke’s gospel made sure to inform us that Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. Peter was babbling. The disciples were so awestricken and amazed when they had a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Peter said, “Let’s stay here!” He wanted to remain in the kingdom of God. Peter had no desires whatsoever, to return back down the mountain, back to earth. He didn’t want to return back to the hard laboring that they had to endure day after day. (You know what Mondays feel like.) Peter did not want to have to deal with the crowds anymore. Least of all, Peter did not want to have to suffer anymore, nor die. As Peter was still speaking, the voice of God suddenly came, and he spoke from a bright cloud which covered the area saying, ***“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (v. 5)*** God said to Peter, “Listen to Jesus!” In that moment of excitement, Peter was only listening to his own heart. His heart told him, “Peter we’ve made it! We don’t have to worry about suffering anymore! We can stay here! We’ve found the shortcut to heaven!” But this was not Christ’s way. God had to come immediately to help Peter. “Peter, listen to my Son,” He told him. Jesus had always taught service, sacrifice, the way of the cross. There can never be any glory in the kingdom, apart from the way of the cross. Listen to Jesus is God’s voice to us all. We must all be careful to listen to Jesus, and not our own selfish hearts with its many passions and desire. We must be careful to tune our ears only to Jesus and his teachings, and to avoid listening to the voice of the world which tells us to pursue your dreams. As Christians, God is calling us all to listen only to Jesus, who humbled himself and obeyed God all the way to the cross, where he gave his life.

This entire event was terrifying for the disciples. They couldn’t understand the meaning of it all. And when they heard the voice of God, they fell prostrate to the ground in fear. This prompted their gentle and loving shepherd Jesus to come by their side and touch them. Reassuring them he said, **“Get up, don’t be afraid.”** And as they looked around, they saw nobody except Jesus. The disciples soon find that they are left with nothing but Jesus to help them through the rest of their journey in life. We learn here that Jesus in our hearts is all we need in our journey of faith. Truly, Jesus is all we need. As we go through life, we find that worldly hopes shatter, our dreams often fail, and even loved ones sometimes disappoint us. But in Jesus, we can rest all of our hopes and dreams because he has already overcome the world. For us to be able to live the life of faith God has called us to, all we need is to hold on to the image of God’s Son in our own hearts.

Now Jesus really wanted these three disciples to meditate on what they saw without causing others to struggle, so as they returned back down the mountain of Transfiguration, he instructs them not to share with anyone what they had just experienced until after his resurrection, when it would be better understood.

Let’s take a look at verses 10-13; it’s apparent that the disciples themselves were still struggling to understand all that had just taken place. They still held on to popular notions about return of Elijah and so they asked Jesus about the prophecy. ***Read Verses 10-13, “The disciples asked him, ‘Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’ Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.”*** The disciples thought that Elijah would come down from heaven and destroy all evil doers and help establish God’s kingdom in Israel. Jesus explained that the Elijah that was to come also had to suffer terribly, and be rejected. Why did they struggle with this? How is it that they couldn’t grasp this? Jesus assured them that John the Baptist as well had to suffer much as he paved the way for the messiah, until he too would eventually give up his life. The fact is that the message of repentance and way of the cross is for all God’s servants before the coming of the Kingdom.

As foolish as the disciples, may have seemed I think we can all relate very well with them. Repentance and the way of the cross is for all of God’s people who have been called to live a life of faith in the Lord Jesus. It is certainly not easy to accept. It is a call for an undying devotion to our Lord Jesus who requires that we are always to be ready and willing to serve God, and be willing to make many sacrifices even at the cost of our own lives. Most aren’t willing to suffer. Most people aren’t willing to sacrifice unless of course they receive some immediate benefit. Christ helps us, in that when we hold on to the vision of his glory in our hearts; we are able to overcome everything for the glory of God. When we see the glory of the transfigured Christ the king of heaven, no sacrifice will ever seem too great for his kingdom.

As I myself went through this passage, I realized that I too needed to see the vision of the Son of Man coming into his kingdom. I understand Peter very well, because I too don’t want to suffer. As some may already know, I desire to live life according to Phil. 3:10 which say, ***“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death…”*** But many times I struggle to just share in the fellowship of discomforts. I too need to hold the image of the glory of the transfigured Christ in my heart so it can dispel all the false worldly image of ease and comfort. Thank God for his words, because through it, my heart can see very vividly the glory of Christ, through faith. I can now repent and live for him. When Jesus was in the garden, the night he was betrayed, he prayed a very beautiful prayer saying, ***"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” (Jn. 17:24).*** Jesus loves you. He really wants us all to be with him and behold his glory in our hearts. May God bless us all to see the glory of the risen Christ in each of our hearts today and may he give us grace to hold on to this image as we live according to his call, in Jesus name.