

**The Many Heavenly Messages
of the Transfiguration of Our Lord
Sermon on Matthew 17:1-9
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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Introduction: The Other-Worldly Nature of the Transfiguration

The psalms urge us: *Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.* And the Transfiguration of our Lord compels us to do exactly that! Amen.

Dear fellow celebrants of the Transfiguration of our Lord:

Sermons usually begin by easing you into the Word of the Lord for the day. We preachers usually try to take you from your vantage point and slowly shift you to what God wants you to consider for the day.

I'm not going to do that this morning. And there's a reason for that. Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of Our Lord. There's very little in this world that relates to that! The account of Jesus' Transfiguration transports us, as it were, to a whole different world. It was a rather abrupt trip for its first witnesses, and it's not inappropriate that we dive right into the account, as well.

Theme: The Many Heavenly Messages of the Transfiguration

So, what I'd like to do with you today is to consider: THE MANY HEAVENLY MESSAGES OF THE TRANSMUTATION OF OUR LORD. The account is rather familiar to very many of you. So, I'll simply read it, and we'll consider it together.

Exposition & Application: The Account of the Transfiguration of Our Lord

It is – who knows? – maybe summer of the year twenty-nine AD, and less than a year before Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf. Jesus and his apostles are in the far northern reaches of the Holy Land, near a place called Caesarea Philippi, more than a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Jesus is just about to begin his slow and steady journey to go and accomplish our salvation.

Just now, as we heard in Pastor Werner's sermon this past week, Jesus had asked his apostles: "Who do people say I am?" And Peter had replied, in part on behalf of the others: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." After that, Jesus began to announce in earnest his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter objects: "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" And Jesus replies to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!"

And now, we read—and this is God's Word for us this morning: *It was six days after this*, as if to prove to Peter and the others that God's glory comes through the cross of Christ—**After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James.** These same three had accompanied him to witness him raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. These same three would accompany him into the middle of the Garden of Gethsemane. They were an inner circle of sorts. And the fact that Jesus had an inner circle should remind us not to be jealous when other leaders have inner circles—and we're not a part of them.

Anyway, Jesus **led them up a high mountain by themselves.** No doubt, these were the slopes of Mount Hermon—towering nine thousand feet into the sky,

overlooking the entire Holy Land, as much as a hundred miles to the south. From Mount Hermon began to flow the Jordan River.

There he was transfigured before them. Literally: *he underwent a metamorphosis*—that’s the exact Greek word that’s used here, and keep that in mind for later....

Now, what did that mean? – Well: **His face shone like the sun.** Can you imagine?! Jesus’ face shone so bright that it hurt the eyes! It’s a measure how brightly holy he is—how permeating his perfection! And we tend to forget that. We want to think of Jesus as our “buddy”. **And his clothes became as white as the light.** Mark says: “whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them”! Luke says: “like a flash of lightning”!

So, the message is clear: Despite Jesus’ impending suffering and death, Jesus is God! And it makes us all take his suffering and death more seriously.

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Did you ever wonder, when you get to heaven, whether you’d recognize your loved ones or others? There’s a clue here. The three apostles recognized Moses and Elijah, though they had lived more than fourteen hundred years and more than eight hundred years earlier. When we get to heavenly glory, we’ll recognize others, too.

But more significantly, “Why were Moses and Elijah here”? And, “What were they talking to Jesus about, anyway?”

“Why were Moses and Elijah here?” The Old Testament was often referred to as “the Law and the Prophets”. Moses was the great lawgiver, and Elijah was the great representative of the prophets. Jesus had come to fulfill what this lawgiver and what the prophets had spoken and written. Furthermore, Moses and Elijah had a lot in common with Jesus. God had done outstanding miracles through Moses and Elijah. Each of the two had won an astounding victory in showdowns with God’s enemies. Each had trained many others to serve the Lord. Each had successors following him. It was all a lot like Jesus. Besides, nobody could now check the graves of these men. Moses’ grave was a hundred miles south, somewhere on Mount Nebo, known only to God. Elijah had no grave at all, since he was taken to heavenly glory in a chariot of fire.

And, “What were these two talking to Jesus about anyway?” Luke reports: It was “his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.” It was as if to tell Peter and the others, “Don’t doubt what Jesus said about his dying! Even we are talking to him about what is about to happen.”

So, how do the three apostles react? – **Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here**—*beneficial, advantageous, and important*. You can hear a note of wonder and joy in his voice. So, do you think we’ll enjoy the pleasure of paradise, too?

If you wish – Peter goes on – **I will put up three shelters** – actually, he was offering the help of his two companions: *Let us make three shelters* – **one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.** And doesn’t that strike you as two too many shelters? Shouldn’t Peter’s attention have been on Jesus, who would remain? Shouldn’t our attention be on Jesus, who will remain?!

But: **While he was still speaking** – as if to answer Peter – **a bright cloud enveloped them.** Literally, *this cloud, which had light, overshadowed them*. It was a cloud like no other. It didn’t block light; it produced light. It didn’t produce a shadow; it caused other objects to produce shadows.

And get this! **A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.** It was, word for word, what the Father had said at Jesus’ baptism, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, nearly three years earlier. Literally: *This is my Son* – God’s Son: God the Son! God himself! – *the Beloved One* – loved by me, because he’s my Son; loved by you, because he’s your Savior – *with him I am well*

pleased – “Peter, when he spoke about his suffering and death, that pleased me.” In fact, exactly on that point: **Listen to him!!**

...Which is a message for us also.... *Listen to him!* when he says that from conception and birth, you were corrupt to the core. *Listen to him!* when he says that he has, nevertheless, given you a new birth. *Listen to him!* when he says that the pagan course you are on, the apathetic course you are on, the rebellious, the hateful, the adulterous, the greedy, the mean course you are on ... leads to destruction. And: *Listen to him!* when he says that he has also forgiven you.

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. This was no attitude of, “Oh, I suppose we ought to bow to our King now....” No, this was a fall to the ground, curl up, hide your head kind of attitude. They literally *were greatly afraid*.

And you and I would have been, too! Can you imagine?!—surrounded by God, permeated by God: knowing God was reading all your memories of all your wicked, mean, dirty thoughts, knowing God was aware of every evil place your feet had been, every evil thing your hands had done, every evil word your lips had whispered. And you and I will experience that, too—on the Day of Judgment.

But!—But Jesus came and touched them—took hold of them, literally, to calm them. **“Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”**

And he says the same to us....

Don’t be afraid! Despite your sins, I kept my thoughts clean—for you! I spoke only loving words—for you! My feet have hurried to help, my hands have healed and loved—and I did it in place of you! Through me, you are qualified to enter paradise.

Don’t be afraid! Jesus says. “Your evil thoughts? What evil thoughts?! My Father has forgotten them. I accepted the guilty verdict for them. Your wicked words? What wicked words would those be?! My Father hears only my whisper: *Father, forgive them*. Your awful actions? What awful actions?! I went through hell and died to erase their memory.”

Don’t be afraid!

And: **When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.**

Isn’t that the way it should be for us? Our alarm clock goes off. We look at the time. We see no one but Jesus ... to serve that day. We’re face to face with that teacher or student with whom we’ve struggled, we’re face to face with that boss or coworker or employee or customer who mistreats us so badly, we’re in our thousandth argument with our child or our ten thousandth with our spouse. We see no one but Jesus ... to love and to serve. We get to the end of our life, we suffer and approach our death. We see no one but Jesus to take us home to dwell with him.

And then, finally: **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.”** Huh? Jesus had just revealed himself as God and Savior in an amazing way. The three apostles weren’t supposed to say anything about it? That’s right—at least not right away. And they didn’t say anything about it—at least not right away. You see, Jesus knew it would all get misunderstood—at least right away.

But what about now? Sometimes you and I live as if Jesus were still saying to us, “*Don’t tell anyone what you have seen.*” That was then. This is now. Now: “*The Son of Man has been raised from the dead.*” Now, we need to go and tell, to go and make disciples of all nations, to preach the good news to every creature. So, let’s open up! Let’s share the news! Let’s let others know there’s no need to be afraid any longer.

Conclusion: Our Transformation Makes the Transfiguration This-Worldly

So, that's the account of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. Now, do you remember what I said you should file away for later? It's that the word for transfiguration here is literally, letter for letter: metamorphosis. It's a word that the Holy Spirit uses two other times in the Bible—not for Christ, but for us! In Romans chapter twelve, God says: *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed – be transfigured! undergo a metamorphosis! – by the renewing of your mind.* In Second Corinthians chapter three, the Holy Spirit says: *We are being transformed – we are being transfigured! we are undergoing a metamorphosis! – into Christ's likeness.*

Do you see what that says? The message of Jesus' transfiguration – the fact that Jesus is God and Savior – has the power to transfigure you, to give you metamorphosis: to transform you from a bug to a butterfly, right?! That's what metamorphosis means.

So, this week – and forever! – live a new life: one worthy of Christ, in whose sunshine and light, in whose transfiguration, you now bask.... Amen.

The psalms urge us: *Let us praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.* And the Transfiguration of our Lord compels us so to praise him! Amen.