

A Glimpse of What's to Come

One-off service: *Transfiguration Sunday*

Text: Matthew 17:1-13

Preacher: Elliot Rice

Date: February 23rd, 2020

Readings: Ex 24:12-18

Context: Papanui Baptist Church

“I will put up three shelters”

This is a strange story . . . I'm glad Peter's in it—he's my way in here. I can relate to him: enthusiastic, a bit clueless, not great at allowing God to lead. In response to all this wild glory, Peter thinks they should start a building project. He jumps to a practical solution. What do we do with strange stories like this one? We try and explain it, rationalise it. We try to domesticate Jesus, put him in a box we can manage, keep him within our frame of reference. But the cloud appears and the voice interrupts us: “Listen to him!” It's tempting, like Peter with his shelters, to try and domesticate this story, make it familiar and accessible. Peter wanted three shelters; I want three points for my sermon . . . But I don't want to tame this wild picture of glory! How about we feel our way into the story for a while, and allow Jesus to stretch our frame of reference, meet him afresh this morning.

Caesarea Philippi, Messiah, Suffering

“After six days,” it says. *What was happening six days ago?* Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Now there's a political name for a region if ever there was one . . . Caesarea Philippi was named after two of the figures responsible for the Roman occupation of Israel: Caesar Augustus and Herod Philip. A modern parallel would be the recently renamed “Trump Heights,” a planned Israeli settlement in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, widely regarded as illegal under international law. Of all places, it's *here*, in this political hotbed, that Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah—the anointed one for Israel's salvation! In other words, Jesus confirms his identity in a region devoted to the belief that Caesar is lord. And if *Jesus* is Lord, then Caesar is not! Caesarea Philippi, Messiah—these are loaded names, and they promise revolution.

So, when Jesus follows that up by explaining that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed, the disciples think maybe they've misheard him . . . “Ah . . . *Say that again?*” In fact, Peter's *indignant*: He takes Jesus aside and begins to *rebuke* him. “Never, Lord!” he says. “This shall never happen to you!” But again, Peter's trying to fit Jesus into *his* picture of the Messiah, instead of letting Jesus shape it for him. Peter's trying to build shelters over Jesus, trying to domesticate him into something he understands. Then Jesus gives his instruction: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” Then he waits six days.

“For six days the cloud covered the mountain”

Earlier, we heard a similar story of mountain climbing and clouds of glory in the book of Exodus. Moses climbed up Mt Sinai to meet with God, and “For six days the cloud covered the mountain.” God wrapped Godself in mystery, hidden in the cloud. Moses was up there to meet with God and receive his instructions. But the cloud came first; the mystery preceded the revelation. In the same way, for six days the cloud covered the words Jesus spoke to the disciples. He revealed his identity as the Messiah in Caesarea Philippi, and they thought they knew what that meant: military victory, Israel in power, down with the Romans. But Jesus said that he must suffer many things, that he must

be killed, and on the third day be raised to life. And so, for six days the cloud covered the mountain. Jesus' identity, momentarily revealed, was then shrouded in mystery.

After six days, Jesus took Peter and the Zebedee brothers up a high mountain by themselves. Why did he wait six days? Is there any significance about the seventh day? In the creation story, God created the world in six days, and the seventh day he *rested*. It's the day of completion, of fulfilment. "And on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the mountain."

"His face shone like the sun"

"There he was *transfigured* before them." *What does that mean?* Harry Potter and his friends went to transfiguration classes at Hogwarts with Professor McGonagall, who was able to transfigure herself into the form of a cat. To transfigure is to change, take a new form.

Jesus was transfigured—not "*he transfigured himself*"—so that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light—he was transfigured into something bright and shining! It's similar to how Moses, when he came back down from Mt Sinai, his face was radiant from speaking with God. His face was shining so much he had to put a veil over his face! It's similar to that, but not the same. Unlike Moses, Jesus' shining is a glory that comes *before* the cloud shrouds the mountain. Moses' face shines from the *reflection* of God's glory. But the radiance of Jesus *is* God's glory.

There's a third story of shining faces in Scripture. The book of Revelation describes the New Jerusalem when all is made new at the end of the age: *The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it.* Just as Jesus is the image of the invisible God, so in the new creation, Jesus, the Lamb, is the lamp that shines forth the glory of the invisible Trinity. The transfiguration anticipates the hope of new creation. As Stan Hauerwas puts it, "At the transfiguration the disciples get a glimpse of the glory of the Son of Man—the Son who was with the Father on the seventh day and the Son who will be with the Father on the last day." The veil between heaven and earth gets pulled back for a moment, gives us a glimpse of what's to come.

"Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus"

And his transfiguration was accompanied by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Moses was the giver of the laws; Elijah was the great prophet. Their appearance with Jesus seems to be a way of saying that the whole of the Old Testament revelation is finding its fulfilment here in Jesus. The laws and the prophets were all preparing us for him! Then we get the words from the Father in the cloud. I like the Message translation: "*This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.*" A glimpse of the Trinitarian God, the Father expressing his love for his Spirit-anointed Son. A glimpse of what's to come—the new creation previewed in the present.

The vision is fleeting. Unable to handle the glory, the disciples bury their faces in the ground. The next thing they notice is a hand—the rough carpenter's hand of Jesus on their shoulder, his same familiar voice: "Get up." "When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus." And they begin the return journey, back down the mountain.

The Via Dolorosa

The idea of a suffering Messiah comes up again on the descent . . . Jesus instructs the disciples, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” He alludes to the death of John the Baptist, who had recently been beheaded by Herod. “In the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”

The transfiguration—whatever that is—is bookended by these two promises about the suffering of the Son of Man. The story happens on the *Via Dolorosa*: on the way of the cross. It’s a brief glimpse of glory and wonder piercing the road marked with suffering, both for Jesus, and eventually for his disciples, as they each go to their crosses.

And the church calendar gives us this story at this time every year, the last week of Epiphany, of the revelation of God, before Lent begins this coming Ash Wednesday. It’s a moment of glory and revelation to light a story of suffering and sacrifice. The Catholic Catechism explains it this way: “Christ’s Transfiguration aims at strengthening the apostles’ faith in anticipation of his Passion: the ascent onto the ‘high mountain’ prepares for the ascent to Calvary.”

William Willimon tells the story of a woman in his church who gave birth to a profoundly disabled son. Her husband walked out on them after 6 months, saying, “I just can’t handle this.” As the boy grew, the church marvelled at how well she handled it. What others saw as a burden, she saw as a blessing. 19 years later, after the child’s funeral, Willimon praised her strength and asked how she persevered. Her response:

Fortunately I didn’t have to do it by myself. One day, when Tommy was seven he acted like he was two all day. After a number of tantrums, I got him to sit by the window and watch for the rubbish truck man to come. Then I went to the kitchen and thought to myself, “I just can’t do this, I can’t go on.” But then I looked behind me through to where Tommy was sitting, and he was looking out the window with amazement on his face at the wonder of the rubbish truck man. The sunlight shone on his face. The gift is being able to see my son the way God sees him. And it was only a glimpse, but it was enough.

God once told Sarah to sit by a homeless person on Queen Street . . . It was a picture, clear as day, almost audible! So, she sat by the person and heard their story, and they heard hers. The next day, she walked past the homeless person again, but this time there was no vision or word from God. Sarah realised God had invited her into a habit, but that he’d only given a glimpse he intended her to act upon. She had to learn to trust the gift of the vision given.

The Transfiguration was a special event. It was meant to strengthen their faith for the challenges they would later endure. But it was only temporary. It wasn’t meant to be permanent. In the same way, at certain times in this life, God may give us special experiences of his grace that strengthen our faith. Maybe that’s why you’re here this morning: hoping for an epiphany, hoping to get a glimpse through the veil. We should welcome these experiences for the graces they are. But we can’t build shelters over them. This taste of new-creation-glory sustains Jesus and the disciples for the road marked with suffering. These momentary glimpses of the kingdom come strengthen us on the road that will—ultimately—bring us into the infinite and endless joy of heaven. It’s enough to go on.