

***Transfiguration Sunday***  
***The Highs and Lows of Following Jesus***  
Matthew 17:1-13, Psalm 99, Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21  
March 6, 2011

How many of you have had an spiritual experience like Peter, James and John? Have experienced God or Jesus in all his glory? Saw Moses and Elijah face to face, or perhaps some others that have gone on before? Good, I am glad I am not the only one who has not. This morning is “Transfiguration Sunday” on the Christian calendar. Our passage this morning about Jesus’ transfiguration has been strategically positioned on the Christian calendar. Strategically positioned to come between the last Sunday of the period of the Epiphany, the period which begins right after Christmas, celebrating Jesus’ coming to earth and his earthly ministry, and the first Sunday of Lent, the season which focuses on Jesus going to the cross.

Of all the people that we read about in the Bible, I think I can relate to the disciple Simon Peter the best. At times he seemed to have such great faith, seemed so in tune with God and Jesus, who Jesus was. And then at other times he seemed to have such little faith and just didn’t get it at all.

To grasp the full meaning of just about any passage of Scripture we need to look what comes before and after it to see its context. Our passage this morning is no different. In Matthew 16 we find Peter’s great confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God:

*When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*

*“But what about you?” he asked, “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.*

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

Do you think Peter might have been on a spiritual high after hearing those words spoken to him by Jesus? “Blessed are you Simon, you are the rock that I am going to build my church upon.”

Here we are at a critical point in Jesus’ ministry. His ministry has been going quite well; lots of healings and miracles, generating lots of followers. His own disciples starting to discover who He really is, climaxed by Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” the proclamation that Jesus would build his church upon. Oh, things seemed to be going so good!

Matthew 16:21-28 *From that time . . .* Apparently Simon Peter didn’t quite get it.

Then we have the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-9      *After six days . . .*

Does the scenario sound kind of familiar?

Quite similar to the account from Exodus, of Moses going up to Mt. Sinai. A lot of similarities. “After six days” is significant. And on the 7<sup>th</sup> day the Lord appeared. The 7<sup>th</sup> - the Lord’s Day. Perhaps a reminder of Jesus’ own words, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath.” “His face shone like the sun, and clothes became as white as snow.” If Peter had any doubt who Jesus was, “the Son of the Living God,” meaning none other than God himself, if there was any doubt before, there should be none now.

It is also significant that Moses and Elijah are the two who appeared at *The Transfiguration*. Moses who received the Law on Mt. Sinai. Moses representing the Law and Elijah the prophets. Perhaps a reminder of Jesus’ words “*I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.*” Jesus himself is the fulfillment.

And the words spoken by God, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*” The same exact words that were spoken from heaven at Jesus’ baptism with one exception. At the transfiguration are added the words, the command, *Listen to him!*” Actually it means more than just “listen to him.” It means “pay attention” and “obey.”

Do you think Peter, James and John were on a spiritual high when they were up there on the mountain? So much so that Peter says, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” And he wanted to build three shelters, one for each of them. Why don’t we make this last as long as we can? Perhaps forever. Let’s just stay here. But they couldn’t. They had to come down off the mountain. And as they come down off the mountain, once again Jesus tells them that “the Son of Man is going to suffer, the same way that John the Baptist did, John the Baptist being the Elijah who was to come.

Then the story of the healing of the boy who was demon possessed. The healing by Jesus and the lack of healing by the disciples.

#### Matthew 17:14-22

In the gospel of Mark’s it says that afterwards, when his disciples asked Jesus privately, why they could not drive out the evil spirit, Jesus replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting” (Mark 9:29). The implication being that the disciples were not always spiritually in tune with Jesus. Were they not taking the time to pray and fast? Perhaps they were trying to rely on their own power.

The highs and lows, the ups and down of following Jesus

Contextually speaking we are in a segment of Matthew’s gospel which reveals to us very much the failures of the disciples. They seem torn between faith and doubt. At times they have the power of God which comes through faith, to heal and to drive out demons, and at times they

have no power at all. In the middle of it all they are told what they really need to do, “listen to him!” “Pay Attention!” “Obey!”

The Transfiguration was meant to give Jesus’ closest disciples just a glimpse of the glory to come. “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”

Jesus’ sonship is defined by the path he travels. It commenced at his baptism, leads through his teaching and miracles, and climaxes in crucifixion, and then resurrection. This and no other way is the way of the Son of God and for those to follow. But it is a path resisted by even his closest disciples, and the transfiguration is part of God’s own instruction to them and to us today, ‘Listen to him!’ The pending cross has cast a harsh shadow on the path of Jesus and clouded the disciples understanding, but for one shining moment his present vulnerability was swallowed up by the brilliance of his coming majesty.

“Listen to him!” And what were they to listen to? To what Jesus had said before the transfiguration and the words from his mouth which were to follow. About suffering as the narrow way of sonship/daughtership and the path to glory. What was true for Jesus and his earliest disciples is true of his disciples today. We need to “listen to Him,” pay attention,” “obey.” The way to glory is only possible through obedience, the way of suffering and the way of the cross.

In the entire context in which we find the Transfiguration account, we find suffering and struggle, mixed in with moments of glory. We have Peter’s confession and a moment of glory for the disciples, quickly followed by words of suffering, death and resurrection. Then we have the transfiguration and they are back in glory land once again. Followed by the confusion of the disciples about the role of Elijah and John the Baptist which leads to the accusation by Jesus of their lack of faith and their inability to heal the demon possessed boy. And then more predictions by Jesus of his pending suffering and dying.

We have the pattern of cross and glory. It was the pattern for Jesus and it is the pattern for his followers. Our lives as Christians will have times of suffering and joy. Our lives as Christians will have times of cross and glory. That’s the way it is as we follow Christ in the world. It’s as if Jesus is saying to us:

“Peter got it right. I am the Christ the Son of the Living God. I am also the Christ who must walk the path of suffering and death. I am the Christ who will be raised in glory.

“I am the Christ who invites you to take up your cross and follow me in my path of suffering service. I am also the Christ who will dazzle you, at times, with my transfigured glory.

“I am the Christ who will be with you when you are faithless and doubting. I am the Christ who will walk with you in your times of doubt and lead you to the land of light.

“I am the Christ of both cross and glory. I will share my cross with you. You will share the glory with me. Now, Listen to me!”

As followers of Jesus we will have times of glory. Times in which we will see or experience God like we have never seen him before. Perhaps not as clear as for Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration. But they did not have the Holy Spirit at the time, which came to the disciples only after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. But the times of glory are only meant to give us a glimpse of what is to come. We will also have times of cross: struggle, suffering, hardship and death.

On our spiritual journey's of following Jesus, we all experience highs and lows. Times when the Holy Spirit is present, where we can really see God working. Even experience miracles and healings. And then there are other times that just seem so dry. That often seem to last forever and even cause us to ask where is God? More often than not, the times just happen. Can't make them happen. God allows them to happen.

But I do believe that we can create opportunities for them to happen. I think we can make two very big mistakes. One, is that we get so caught up in our busy lives, with all our distractions and all our busyness, and trying to make things happen on our own, that we really forget who is in charge. And we miss out on a lot of opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work, or we just don't observe it when He or She does. Think about it, why would God allow them to happen if we're not going to give Him the credit? We can also block the Holy Spirit from working in several different ways, two pointed out in our passages this morning: disobedience and lack of prayer. God said to Peter, James, and John, when they got a glimpse of who Jesus really is, "now listen to him!" If we're not obeying, not following, then it is absurd for us to think that we're really going to experience the Holy Spirit. Or even when we do, it might not be in such a pleasant way. Perhaps a knock across the side of the head. I have received a couple of them in my days.

And prayer. When we limit our prayer life, or we limit it to just individuals praying, I think we diminish the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work. These words from a recent Prayer Devotional entitled *Connection* from Harvest Prayer: "There is a different atmosphere in churches that pray together and who have praying people. Worship seems more powerful. There is a sense of connection with God. Praying together invites the presence and power of the Holy Spirit." And this quote, "The presence of God in the midst of a church is directly proportional to the amount of prayer that takes place there."

The other mistake we can make is that when we do experience those aha moments, those times when we really do sense the Holy Spirit among us, our human instinct is to try and hold on to them or make them work, like it is within our power. Like Peter saying, "hey I'll build three shelters and we'll just stay here." In this life we can't stay on top of the mountain, we have to come down.

I came across this quote as I was preparing for last Sunday evening's Bible study, from William Barclay's commentary on The Letter to the Romans, p. 86. I shared it last week but it just seems so fitting to the time in which we find ourselves in: The time between Jesus' first coming and His second, in which all who choose to put their faith in Him will experience His glory, once and for all.

“Christianity is not an emotional experience; it is a way of life. The Christian is not meant to luxuriate in an experience however wonderful; he is meant to get out and live a certain kind of life in the teeth of the world’s attacks and problems.”

Personal Testimony of Carey (Whitsett) Clerico