

Jesus Transfigured, God's People Transformed

On this Transfiguration Sunday, our New Testament Scripture is Matthew 17:1-8. Jesus had reached a milestone with his disciples on his retreat with them in Caesarea Philippi, where Simon Peter confessed him as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (16:16). Jesus then began to explain the kind of messiah he was, a suffering servant who would be rejected and crucified. The disciples would also have their crosses to bear in following him. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to the top of a mountain, where they were permitted to see a partial unveiling of the glory of the eternal Son of God, as his appearance was transformed to partially reflect the glory of his heavenly state. They were given a foretaste of heavenly worship, something we should strive for every time we gather on the Lord's Day.

Follow as I read **Matthew 17:1-8**:

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Although the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ was an unrepeatable revelation of Christ's glory to a select inner core of disciples, it nevertheless gives us the principles of life-changing worship. Peter, James, and John never forgot this experience. Both John, in his gospel (John 1:14) and Peter, in his second letter (2 Peter 1:16-18) refer to this event, which apparently impacted their lives.

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves (1). How privileged were these three beloved disciples to be invited to this worship experience! The doors into our sanctuary represent God's invitation to us as his people. What a privilege it is to be invited by God to worship him! Dale Heights is not the host. Jesus Christ himself invites us to worship him in this room.

We who belong to Jesus know we didn't seek God. He sought us, even when we were running from him. We were like the woman at the well, whom Jesus found and invited to become a worshiper "In spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:23). Just like Peter, James, and John, you and I were chosen by God to become his worshipers. Just as in their case, there was no special goodness or deserving on our part.

We're being saved by grace alone, and given a new heart that desires to worship him.

When I visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, to get into that vast cathedral I had to stoop over to clear the low entrance. During the Crusades, the entrance was lowered to keep enemy invaders from riding their horses into the church to destroy and desecrate the interior. It's not a bad idea to remember to lower ourselves a bit when we enter this place of worship, realizing it is grace alone that gives us this privilege.

We're all invited into this worship center, whatever our appearance, social class, race, religious background, identity or lack thereof. As missional people, we receive strength and encouragement to take the message of God's love to those who may never attend our church. But all whom the Father is drawing to himself are welcome in this place. May in our minds these words be over the entrances, The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears say, "Come" (Rev. 22:17). We were invited when we were outsiders. Now as part of the Bride and led by the Spirit we say, "Come!" The best, and only truly effective publicity for Dale Heights, is for you and me to say, "Come with me to worship this Sunday."

As we enter this room for worship we gather as the people of God in fellowship with each other, as Peter, James and John were bound together to share this worship experience. Dale Heights is a church that loves to be together, demonstrated every Sunday during the passing of the peace and in the fellowship time in the concourse.

The Book of Hebrews speaks to this element of worship: "²⁴*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching*" (10: 24-25).

We also enter through these entrances with expectancy. We can only imagine the wonderment in the minds of Peter, James and John as the Lord led them to the top of the mountain. What would be in store for them? And, so it should be also with us. There ought to be a sense of expectancy that we have come to meet God. When we hear the choral introit and call to worship, we should be stirred with a sense of expectancy that God will meet us. May we come here to meet one another, but primarily to meet with God and to be with Jesus, who promises to be with his people gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20)

The place of the Transfiguration was "a high mountain" (1). Bible scholars conjecture as to which mountain, and the one that makes sense is Mt. Meron, which is the highest in Israel at 3,926 feet, and one that would have been on their route from Caesarea Philippi. Not high in comparison with the Himalayas,

certainly. It wasn't a very notable place. What made it "high" was the experience of worship with Jesus.

This is a very lovely and wonderful worship center, but you can find bigger and more elaborate, expensive and expansive ones right here in our city. What will make this a very high and holy place will be the presence of Jesus and his meeting with us. That will make this "mountain" higher and more majestic than Everest. Jesus will make this worship center grander than St. Paul's or St. Peter's Cathedrals. The interior of this place is to enable us to see Jesus.

When I was a young preacher, I was invited to be the guest preacher in a church that had a quote from John's Gospel (12:21) printed on the pulpit so the preacher would be sure to read it before giving his sermon. It was the request of some Greeks to Philip: "Sir, we would see Jesus." The message to me was this church was expecting my sermon to help them see Jesus, i.e. to see and hear his message and person more clearly.

Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. His resplendent glory, which he had with the Father from all eternity, shone through. These disciples were allowed to see a glimpse of his resurrection glory that was his when he ascended back into heaven and the glory that will be his when he returns to earth on the clouds.

Jesus, in this time of heavenly worship, was visited by two of the greatest Old Testament personalities, Moses and Elijah. Their presence showed that Jesus is greater than Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet and forerunner of the Messiah. These worshipers, Peter, James, and John, realized that Jesus alone, not these Old Testament greats, is worthy of worship. He's the one we've come to see and to hear.

Peter, who often talked even when he had nothing to say, uttered something about building three dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. In seminary, we would have said Peter was talking like some church growth people in our denomination, who had an 'edifice complex,' obsessed with church buildings. But the voice from heaven said they were to focus on the Son and listen to him! True worship doesn't depend on buildings, but is to see Jesus by hearing the words of God, who can meet us anywhere. Some of my most transforming worship experiences were not in church sanctuaries. The heart of worship was after Moses and Elijah left and the glory cloud disappeared and they saw no one except Jesus (8). God's voice told them to listen to him!

We meet God in his word. The Reformation brought renewal to the church by returning to the Bible, which is the written witness to Jesus. And central to Jesus' person and purpose is the cross. The word reveals our sinfulness; makes known to us the love of God and the Savior's death for our sins. The word reveals all

we need to know about God, ourselves, and our hope for eternal life. The disciples caught a glimpse of victory and hope in the transfigured Jesus.

We can find the same hope in the word. Worship is a meeting with God that prepares us to live with hope in Christ in this fallen world. This sanctuary is a place to hear God speak, through preaching, Scripture, liturgical reading, and music from singing and instruments. It's a place where you and I are to meet Jesus on a "high mountain." This sanctuary is designed to enhance our ability to see and to meet Jesus, and to express your praise to him. Worship is also to honor and bless the Lord Jesus, even as this Transfiguration was also for Jesus' benefit—to prepare him to face the cross. Worship is not to please ourselves, but the Lord Jesus.

At this Transfiguration worship experience, these disciples not only saw Jesus and heard from God, they experienced awe and fell down before Jesus and received his touch and reassurance and comfort. They had an experience that prepared them to go back into the world of service with Jesus. This sanctuary is to be a place where we together come with confidence to the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:12-14). But our worship life is not confined to this sanctuary. We need to worship God and hear his voice of love and encouragement as a daily experience, in a quiet place and time in your home, or as you take a walk, talking to him as you enjoy the sights of his creation. We all need a regular and daily time of worship, refocusing and re-centering our life of faith. Jesus himself found it necessary to be alone with the heavenly Father (e.g. Mk. 1:35).

At my late older brother's Episcopal ordination service I attended years ago, the bishop challenged him to fulfill his calling as a priest to follow Moses' example to bring the people out to meet God (Ex. 19:17). He told the story of a new school district superintendent who moved to a small community, and who with his family visited various churches as they tried to select one to join. The speaker related how one pastor visited the superintendent's home, and began to list all the activities and programs of the church, hoping to impress this family with his church's array of opportunities for children's youth and family activities. The well-meaning pastor was interrupted by the superintendent, who asked the pastor, "Tell me, pastor, when we go to your church, can we meet God there?" I pray that Dale Heights will be known as a place where people can meet God, worshipping Jesus "on the mountain."

Peter's suggestion to build three tabernacles might have indicated a desire to make the sanctuary a place of retreat from the world. But Jesus led the disciples down from the mountain. The mountaintop worship experience was followed by service in the valley, where they would be confronted by a father, desperate for the healing and deliverance of his son. The experience of worship had prepared them to continue with worshipping hearts in the valley of human suffering and

need. Worship is to be a heartfelt, life-changing experience that will inspire and enable us to serve in the valley.

Worship, instead of a retreat from the world, is more like battle weary soldiers just momentarily hunkering down behind enemy lines, and getting a bit of rest, nourishment and the refreshing of the captain's orders before re-entering the battle for the Kingdom

As we depart the sanctuary, I hope we'll realize that the mountaintop experience of worship has prepared us to live a worshipful life of service. There's a small banner as you exit the church concourse that reads, "After worship, the service begins."

Francis Schaeffer, a great evangelical apologist, for many years, along with his wife, Edith, invited students who were struggling with faith vs. doubt to their home in the Swiss Alps for a time of retreat for prayer and reinforcement of faith. One young woman from Chicago had been at the Schaeffers for a number of days and had been greatly helped and encouraged. As this young lady, who was a Christian social worker, was preparing to depart from this mountaintop experience, she confessed to Dr. Schaeffer, "I'm afraid that when I go back to the harsh streets of Chicago, when I get back there, I might find out that God isn't real." To this Schaeffer replied, "If you go back to the harsh streets of Chicago, and find that God isn't real, then don't come back up here, because if He isn't real in Chicago, he isn't real here either."

God is real here at Dale Heights. After we meet with him in worship, Jesus will be with us as we go into the valley where we live, better able to make him real to others.

