Transfiguration of Our Lord

Shine Down, Rise Up

Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration of Our Lord
Analysis by Matt Metevelis

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



Transfiguration of Jesus, by Carl Bloch, c. 1865 (Fredriksborg Palace) Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The journey of the disciples moves from beholding Jesus in glory to meeting him as he opens their eyes and comforts them with his word. They ascend "by themselves" according to the first verse. Before they descend, they meet "Jesus himself alone" earthbound and fully present in the final verse. Seeking Jesus in his glory is replaced with hearing him in his grace.

DIAGNOSIS: Going Up

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): CGI Jesus

The sight of Jesus covered in shimmery glory stuns the disciples and baffles us. This story stands outside the regular narrative of teachings and healings from Matthew's gospel. Jesus has a shining face and a glimmering robe. He talks with dead prophets. Such scenes are more recognizable to us in Marvel movies than in our everyday lives. We do not experience our religion through the miraculous suspension of the laws of nature. Nor do we expect to. Some believers might even treat this story as a possible embellishment or hallucination on the part of the disciples. This story amazes us and seems incredible (or uncredible) to many of our neighbors. An enchanted Jesus seems so distant from our disenchanted world.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Friends in High Places

Though we don't experience Jesus in lofty settings, they are precisely where we imagine we'll find him. The Jesus most people know is shrouded in exalted words and fantastic iconography. He is somehow above the world we inhabit, attended by angels, and adored by dedicated saints. We think of him in terms of divine superpowers and unattainable teachings about loving people. Religion for many people belongs in distant places like mountain tops. Some people seek to ascend to them. Others forsake the climb to scratch out their own sense of morality or find comfort

in the foothills. When Jesus is portrayed as a heavenly being surrounded by flashing lights and exalted company, he remains high above us. Many appreciate this because, if Jesus is lifted into heaven, we can keep ourselves a safe distance from him here on earth. This narrative tempts us into a great religious failing: to conceive a God who is high up and far off.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Keeping God in a Tent

Once we place God on high, chasing God becomes our personal achievement. We seek God in ecstatic experiences, isolating ourselves from the world to get closer to the divine. This is the religion of the "spiritual but not religious" crowd. Relating to God (or the universe or inner peace or whatever numinous reality) spiritually, is never a matter of sitting in the same space as other people, saying the same prayers, listening to the same things, holding to the same traditions. "Spiritual" people seek God apart from the company of others and in "mountaintop" experiences—meditating, hiking, exercising in the "flow state," or any number of other individual activities. Connection to higher realities is about personal efforts and thoughts and achievements. This is Peter's impetus to build tents and house the holy glory revealed in Jesus just as the kavod or God's presence entered the tabernacle in the book of Exodus. God stays high up and unmoving, so meeting God becomes the story of our effort, our individual effort. If God stays up on the mountain finding, him will always be our own personal story.



The voice of Jesus makes us a light for the whole earth. (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: Coming Down

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Word Unleashed

Peter's quest to contain Jesus in a place of pilgrimage is overshadowed (literally) by a cloud with a message. The disciples are told to listen to Jesus instead of seeking him in visions of glory. Rather than telling their own story, they must listen to Jesus speak. "Rise up," he tells them, "Do not be afraid." The journey of the disciples moves from beholding Jesus in glory to meeting him as he opens their eyes and comforts them with his word. They ascend "by themselves" according to the

first verse. Before they descend, they meet “Jesus himself alone” earthbound and fully present in the final verse. Seeking Jesus in his glory is replaced with hearing him in his grace. Jesus no longer catches their eye, he catches their ear. No longer do they seek glory, that glory becomes a word that seeks them. The law abruptly ends, and the gospel begins. Jesus lifts his cowering disciples to their feet and occupies their entire field of vision.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): God in Low Places

A god confined to a mountain top will always be cloaked behind a lofty goal or an exalted quest—a canvas onto which we project our own fears, struggles, and illusions. God in Jesus Christ has come down from the mountain to seek us in those same fears and struggles, replacing our illusions with the reality that we just cannot bear those crosses on our own. “Rising up” is not just something Jesus tells the disciples to do, it is also something that he does—rising up in from his tomb so that we all might have new life and freedom from fear. Such divine glory isn’t content to hang out in a tabernacle but clings to a cross. While we remain tempted to chase our image of God up a mountain, the real God awaits us in the valley—nailed there in order to meet us where we slip and fall. We meet Christ, not in our most ecstatic spiritual experiences, but in real life. We find him when we are trapped in ourselves, and crucified by our sins, afflictions, and flaws. And it’s right there where it’s not our own voice, but the voice of another that says, “Rise up, don’t be afraid.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): From Vision to Voice

We might not glimpse God in heavenly visions. But the incarnate

God we know in Jesus Christ buries his voice in our interactions with one another. Once we hear him ourselves, we are empowered to say, “Stand up, don’t be afraid” to our neighbors. We confess this freedom from fear when we share our faith. We embody it when we meet our neighbor in her suffering and empower her to stand up and tell her story without trying to judge or proscribe. We enter into it when we advocate or speak for those who can’t be heard. We embrace it when we help people to stand just by standing beside them. We carry it when we shout the gospel either to ourselves or to our communities—especially when those voices of fear try to overthrow it. Our faith becomes the place where the voice of Jesus speaks. This is the miracle that people witness over and over again. When faithful saints like John Lewis stand up and walk across a bridge in Selma, or when we do like the Italian priest who, in the height of COVID, gave up his respirator so that another could have it. The voice of Jesus makes us a rising, sacrificing, fearless people and makes his glory not just a flash and flicker on top of a mountain, but a light for the whole earth.