

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 9:2-9

Sermon: The Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 11, 2018

Today is the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the final Sunday after Epiphany, and the most wondrous manifestation of our Lord's glory in all of Holy Scripture. It's really the culmination of everything that began with the birth of Christ on Christmas.

Concerning the transfiguration, the apostle John ties it to the Lord's birth: ***"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Christmas), and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (Transfiguration)"*** (John 1:14).

John of Antioch, the man with no last name was one of the most famous doctors of the early Church. Born in AD 347, he prepared for a career in law.

But at the age of 23, John learned about Christ, was baptized, and abandoned the law in favor of service to the Savior. As a preacher his oratorical excellence gained him a reputation throughout the Christian world. His popularity earned him election as the Patriarch of Constantinople, from which he launched a crusade against excessiveness and greed among the members of the Church.

John's sermons and letters, theological treatises, liturgical works, and Bible commentaries were so great that when he died, John was given a last name, Chrysostomos or Chrysostom, which in Greek means the "golden-mouthed."

Peter refers to the Transfiguration in his epistle too: ***"We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am***

well pleased, we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1:16–18).

John of Antioch or John Chrysostom claimed the Transfiguration mountaintop experience for himself, even though he lived centuries afterward. And every Christian can say with him: **"A Strange and Most Glorious Mystery Do I See."**

When Jesus led Peter, James, and John up on that high mountain by themselves, what did they see? Our Gospel says, ***"He was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus"*** (vv 2–4).

We can only imagine what it must have been like for those chosen three. To see their friend Jesus literally glowing from his face and his body so that even his clothes could not dull the brightness was a sight they could never forget. Then, to see him conversing with Moses and Elijah in their glorified state was really a foretaste of what the disciples hoped for through their affiliation with Jesus.

Moses, because of his own disobedience, died in the wilderness of Sinai without crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses, the giver of the Law, signifies by his death in the wilderness that no one, not even Moses, can be justified before God by the works of the Law. Yet, here is Moses, glorified in heaven with the Messiah, of whom he also prophesied to the children of Israel:

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die’ ” (Deuteronomy 18:15–16).

And Elijah, that reformer of old who restored to Israel the worship of the true God, was swept away from this world in a flaming chariot, signifying salvation by grace alone through faith alone in the coming Christ alone. This is everything the disciples hoped for in their Lord Jesus. So, it’s no wonder that Peter cries out with inexpressible joy, ***“Rabbi, it is good that we are here”*** (v 5).

But then something happened that changed the exuberance of the disciples: ***“A cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him’”*** (v 7).

The account in Matthew 17 adds that ***“when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified”*** (Matthew 17:6).

Why did their joy turn to fear? Even though the believer longs for such close communion with God, on this side of heaven, we still carry in our flesh the old fallen Adam, who fears such an encounter. Remember how our first parents felt when they chose to follow the word of the serpent instead of the Word of God:

“Then the eyes of both were opened. . . . And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden . . . and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God. . . . The Lord God called to the man and said to him,

'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid . . . and I hid myself'' (Genesis 3:7–10).

As we are by nature, we have been hiding in fear of God ever since. The children of Israel in the wilderness feared the sight of God as he appeared in a pillar of fire. They feared his thunderous voice coming down from heaven. As great as was the prophet Isaiah, fear overcame him before the bare majesty of the “holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.” As great as the disciples were, when the bare voice of God the Father thundered from heaven, fear overtook them on the Mountain of Transfiguration.

But as quickly as that thunderous voice from heaven made them fall on their faces and cower in fear, just so quickly it was all over:

“Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only” (Matthew 17:7–8). What had changed exactly, that they were no longer afraid? Moses and Elijah were no longer seen, though their words were still well known to the disciples. The thunderous voice was no longer heard, even though the words of that voice were still fresh in their minds. Jesus was still there with them, no longer transfigured, to be sure, but it was the same Jesus, whom they now knew without a doubt to be God’s ***“beloved Son, with whom [God the Father was] well pleased”*** (Matthew 17:5) and whom they should hear. In a way, nothing had changed. Only the divine glory and bare majesty of God was again veiled. But now they knew for certain that behind the veil was everything they’d hoped for.

And even though now “they saw no one but Jesus only” in the humble form by which they could look upon him, they could say in the words of John Chrysostom, **“A strange and most glorious mystery do I see.”**

The great cathedrals of the Church, with their towering arches reaching up to heaven, as it were, adorned with magnificent works of Christian art, pipe organs thundering, choirs echoing the great “holy, holy, holy” of the seraphim, were constructed as places of splendor where the people could go for just such a mountaintop experience, to get a glimpse of the world to come—without blinding them, but still causing them to fall to their knees.

For this, the people gathered in these magnificent structures, long before the service would begin, not to visit with their friends as though the church was a kind of social hall, but to pray, to be humbled, and to meditate upon the profound mysteries of Christ, heaven, and their own salvation and glorification before the throne of God through the merits of their Lord and Savior.

Then the divine liturgy, with the Church's own culture of mystical images, gestures, and sounds adorning the Word of God, would lead them from the depths of sin and death, made ever clear by the thundering voice of the Law, to the altar of grace, where Jesus would come and touch them and say, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they would lift up their eyes, they would see no one but Jesus only.

The high point of the transfiguration was not the glorious vision, which sent the disciples falling on their faces. It was when Jesus veiled himself again, touched them with his humanity, and comforted them by removing their fear. For from here, Jesus will go quite directly to the cross, where he will die to take away their reason for fear. The same is true of the Divine Service of the Church. The high point is when Jesus veils himself again in simple bread and wine, touches you, and says, "Do not be afraid . . . take and eat and drink my body and blood given on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins." And if we lift up our eyes, we will see "no one but Jesus only," veiled in his Word and Sacrament. But when Jesus veils himself and his glory, we are being glorified by him. His transfiguration begins to grow in us. We are becoming the new creation, which he has become for our sake, by taking upon himself our flesh.

This is what John the golden-mouthed meant when he said, **"A strange and most glorious mystery do I see."** His life was one of persecution and suffering. Yet, for the sake of Jesus' suffering, he confessed this glorious transfiguration awaiting all believers, as St. Paul says, ***"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"*** (Romans 8:18).

For here, "A strange and most glorious mystery do we see."

Amen