

Introductory

This is the text appointed to be read at Transfiguration in the TLH one-year lectionary. It is also appointed for the A Series in both LW and LSB. The Mark and Luke parallel accounts are read for the B and C series in those hymnals. Transfiguration marks the end of the Epiphany Season and the approach of Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent.

The Baptism of Jesus at the beginning of this season and His Transfiguration here serve as bookends to the Epiphany Season. In both places, and in between, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God and the voice of the Father is distinctly heard revealing something very important about Jesus; that He is His Son and that the Father “well pleased” with the Son.

The Appointed Lessons

It seems like just yesterday that we talked about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Actually, of course, it's been about a year, and for seven years, about this time of the year, I've preached on the Transfiguration from the Three Evangelist. I will this Sunday preach on Matthew's take on the Transfiguration, but I'm going to throw in more OT and EP than usual.

I always preach on the Gospel and I wonder about the people who insist on the one-year lectionary out of a feeling for tradition, but they continue the new practice of preaching from the OT and EP, and seldom from the GO.

After seven years, my hearers know well the nuts and bolts of the Transfiguration, and most of them understand what it means. I will review those nuts and bolts, and probably add a washer – both flat and lock – and then and bring in the OT and EP. The OT looks forward to the Transfiguration, and in the EP, Peter very specifically looks back at it.

Most of us are not Jewish, but the early followers of Jesus were almost exclusively, of that religious bent, and they would have known the OT better than we do. When they thought of “Bible,” they thought of OT, and how well they knew it likely depended on about whom you were talking. The NT has not yet been invented – wait for it!

The Old Testament – Exodus 24: 8 – 18

When Matthew's hearers heard his account of the Transfiguration – depending on how well they knew their Bible – they would have thought of Exodus 24; Moses' trip to Mt. Sinai,

which looks a lot like this trip of Jesus up to Transfiguration Mount. A man on the Internet has identified eight similarities between those two journeys up those respective mounts.

I have cut and pasted his thoughts and the web address of them at the end of these Textual notes. I will spend some time on some of those similarities, but not too much time, and I would never preach an entire sermon on Exodus 24. My hearers are not Hebrew, they are not very familiar with the OT, but are more familiar with the NT, as it should be.

No, they don't need to know more OT, at least if it's going to take precious and little pulpit time from helping them to better understand Jesus, the Messiah. I will not spend too much time on the OT because if I do, their body language will tell you what I just told you; I'm not a Hebrew, nobody is sprinkling animal blood on me, and I'm really not interested.

The Epistle – 1 Peter 1: 16 - 21

Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him, and Peter specifically refers to this incident in his second epistle, which is the appointed epistle text for this day. His take on the Transfiguration, as an eyewitness as well as earwitness to the event, is instructive and interesting and might be a good starting point for us to better understand this event.

Before this (3-11), Peter's subject is the knowledge of God and using that knowledge to live a life reflecting the Christian Ethic, which was somewhat a new thing. Then (12-15) he speaks of his desire to "remind" them of things, notes that he is not long for this world, and expresses his desire that after his passing they be able to "recall" these things.

16. Here he tells them what he is not buying; "cleverly devised myths," but instead he is passing along to them things that he has actually seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears. He is actually among a very few people who can say that, and he does, quoting the voice from the cloud and reminding them that "we were with Him on the holy mountain."

17 – 19. What's noteworthy is Peter's reference right after that to "the word more certain" than what? He had seen what he saw, and he had heard what he heard, but the Word is "more certain" than those senses. The word (βεβαίος) is used often in the NT, and means;

(an adjective, derived from *bainō*, "to walk where it is solid") – properly, solid (sure) enough to walk on; hence, *firm*, *unshakable*; (figuratively) *absolutely dependable*, giving *guaranteed support* (security, surety).

People think that if only they had been there, then it would be easier to believe things like this that we know about only from the Bible. Peter says just the opposite. He was there, so he saw and heard, but that's not a firm a basis for believing those things than the Bible; Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the words the now-departed Peter he writes here.

What powerful words about the power of the Word of God! At some point you might want to point out that it's the Word that makes water Baptism and that it's the Word that makes bread and wine the Sacrament and that by means of that Word – the way all creation was created – God made you into a Christian and keeps you in the Faith.

He uses the very common biblical metaphor of light to describe “the prophetic word” as a “lamp shining in a dark place,” and so it is. In John, Jesus is the light coming into the darkness, but in John Jesus is “the word” in the flesh, so its sort of the same thing, isn't it, and the “light” of the first day stands in stark contrast to the “darkness” that had been there.

When I used to teach Western Civilization to high school students, we used a book written by Christians that referred correctly to The Enlightenment as really the “endarkenment.” Man, without God – who comes to us in the Word – dwells in darkness, and that movement has plunged Western Civilization into spiritual darkness – just look around you.

20. He now focuses in on the Church and her possession and stewardship of the Bible, pointing out that the Church, not the individual, says what the Bible says. An odd idea, to be sure, to the Generic American Christian (GAC), who get together and delight themselves with renditions of what this verse means to me, and me, and me, who cares about you.

21. Then he talks about how the writers – himself included – were not moved by men, but men “carried by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The verb means to be carried, like you would carry a loaf of bread or a stone, and a lot of people take this to be that the writers were in some sort of spirit-filled trance, perhaps only half conscious, when they wrote.

If we understand “The Holy Spirit” to be in the Bible intimately tied to “The Church,” then what Peter means is that he and they all wrote what they wrote in the context of The Church. Harkening back to the previous elimination of the individual in this matter, Peter is saying that he knows what he's talking about – he was there – but that's not important.

What is important is that Peter and the rest are simply putting into writing the teachings of the Holy Christian Church, learned from Jesus, the Word in the flesh, who said and did things, many witnessed by Peter. Far from being semi-comatose, the consciousness of Peter and the rest were fully functioning when they wrote what they wrote.

The writer to the Hebrews, whomever that is, writes to the same Jewish people who would have still been – in general terms – very familiar with the OT. In the ninth chapter in particular, the writer talks about Levitical sacrifices in general, and then (15ff) seems to be talking specifically about Exodus 24, asserting its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah.

Immediately before this ascent up onto the mountain to be transfigured, Peter had made his Great Confession (Mt 16) at Caesarea Philippi, after which Jesus had told His disciples for the first time what was awaiting Him in Jerusalem; suffering, death, and then resurrection. Peter rebuked Him, presumably for the “death” part, and Jesus called him “Satan.”

He then talked about the suffering and hardship that will come likewise for them from following Him. After they come down, Jesus cures an epileptic, then for the second time explicitly tells the disciples again about His going to Jerusalem. This time their response was to be “greatly distressed,” but they said nothing, not wanting to be called “Satan.”

By the third time He told them, it must have soaked in, or perhaps they had just accepted that this is the way this thing is going to go, for no response is recorded from them. At the risk of putting my twenty-first century American mindset into what was going on in first century Palestine, this was a stressful time for Jesus and His merry band.

Textual Notes

1. Then “Καὶ μεθ’ ἡμέρας ἕξ παραλαμβάνει ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰάκωβον καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναφέρει αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλὸν κατ’ ἰδίαν - after six days, Jesus led the Peter and James and John his brother up onto a high mountain by themselves.” If you do the math, that makes it the seventh day, the day God rested from His creative work.

The mountain is called “high” and the words “by themselves” indicate that the purpose of their ascent was to get away from the rest. Luke tells us that they went up there to pray. It was not unusual for this sort of thing to happen; Jesus often desires to get away by Himself, and they often go to the Garden of Gethsemane, and here He takes The Special Trio.

Mount Tabor is almost certainly the place where this took place. In the third century Origen and in the fourth Jerome and Cyril of Jerusalem fixed Tabor as the place of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The current Church of the Transfiguration was built in 1924, preceded by earlier holy places at that same location dating back to the fourth century.

Only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has that location for that event been called into question, with Mt. Hermon espoused as the most likely replacement site. The more I know, the more I think that more of what passes for bible scholarship is not really very good scholarship at all, and much of it is about chasing the Ph.D. and the subsequent book.

We have had this same conversation regarding the location of the tomb of Jesus, and it’s the same with other biblical locations. Nobody is going to earn the doctorate or write a book or teach at university or speak at scholarly events attended by other scholars by putting forth the thesis that Mount Tabor was the location of the Transfiguration of Jesus.

If you say that Matthew wrote Matthew, and Mark wrote Mark, and the like, which Christian teachers taught for centuries, it's much harder to say something profound. Much easier to make up things like JEDP or the Q source, and your name is known around the world and smart people talk about your made-up theories, and your mother is proud of you.

We know where the Battle of Gettysburg was fought. If you go, plan to spend the day. If you go to Pearl Harbor, plan to spend the day. We also know what happened and at Pearl Harbor and on what date. What if some Ph.D. candidate came along with the thesis that Gettysburg was actually fought in Maryland, or that the Japs actually attacked Hilo?

That's what I think of people who say things like people say about locations talked about in the Bible, and that's what I think motivates them to say things like that. Mt. Tabor rises 1800 feet above the Plain of Esdraelon, and it is visible for miles. In a Kilimanjaro sort of a way, you have flat all around and then this mountain sticking out like a sore thumb.

He does not take the full crew, but only three: Peter, James, and John his brother. In the past, I have rather facetiously stated the reason for those three; John was – as he tells us – the BFF of Jesus, and if you're going to take John, then you have to take his twin, and it's easier to just take Peter than to explain to him why James and John get to go and he doesn't.

In the same spirit, we note that it was an eighteen-hundred-foot vertical climb from the base to the top of Mt. Tabor, and maybe the rest of them weren't in very good shape. But of course, a walk like that would have been a piece of cake for these walkers. As it turns out, these three are singled out several times by Jesus while the rest are left behind.

Mark (5:37) tells us that when Jesus went into the room to heal the daughter of Jairus "He allowed no one to follow except Peter and James and John the brother of John." He also (13:3) places the three – plus Andrew the brother of Peter – alone with Jesus at Mt. Olive. Matthew has the three (26:37) alone with Him at Gethsemane.

I don't know about you, but when I was younger I switched out my "best friend" on a nearly annual basis, and sometimes I ran with a group of several "best friends." The same has continued into adulthood, but I've had three besties for several years and my wife would appear to be permanently and firmly ensconced in the BFF position for life.

The simple fact of the matter is that you can't be friends with everybody, and you can't be equally friends with all friends, and it is part of the human condition that people will befriend each other, or not. Why does Jesus befriend these three to the exclusion of the others, and was it more personal or more theological in nature? Hard to say.

2. Matthew uses the word "μετεμορφώθη – transfigured" to describe what happened to Jesus on that mountain. Transfiguration is a distinctly Christian word that describes a specific event in the life of Jesus, and it's the word that ought to be used when speaking of this event, and it's a word which meaning ought to be known by Christians.

Matthew uses two similes to describe what Jesus looked like; that His face “shone like the sun” and his clothing became “white as light.” Mark uses more words and only one simile to describe the same thing, saying that the garments were “glistening” and “intensely white, adding the very graphic “as no fuller on earth could bleach them.”

Luke talks about His appearance “εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἕτερον,” essentially that He “looked different,” and then describes that different look by saying nothing about his face and calling his clothing “dazzling white.” Likely wanting to avoid confusion in the minds of his Greek readers, Luke describes the Transfiguration without using the word.

Matthew’s word, μετεμορφώθη is “the same as metamorphoses (cf. Ovid) of pagan mythology” (WP), and He does not want the Greek readers to think of Jesus in those terms. Robertson encourages us to stick with the Vulgate “transfiguratus est” for that same reason and thinks that we should not talk about Jesus being metamorphized.

3. Enter Moses and Elijah, who are “συνλαλοῦντες μετ’ αὐτοῦ – talking with Jesus. It’s a present participle; it was a conversation. Luke adds that Moses and Elijah “spoke of His departure, which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem.” We find two who had prophesied about the coming of the Christ talking to the Christ about the work of the Christ.

Moses is The Law-Giver and in the thinking of some he is also The Prophet. Others think of Elijah rather than Moses as The Prophet. Both are in fact prophets, and both had encounters with God on mountains. Moses met God on Sinai, and when he came down, his face glowed (Exodus 34:29), just like Jesus’ face is glowing in this incident.

Paul talks about glowing faces and the like to the Corinthians. Elijah met God in the still, small voice on a mountain. The return of Moses as well as Elijah was expected by the Jewish faithful before the apocalypse. The deaths of both Moses and Elijah were unusual; Moses on Mt. Nebo and Elijah didn’t really die now, did he, but rode the chariot to heaven.

It is important to note here that most of us have the benefit of having known about Jesus and about this particular incident for a long time, some of us even for all of our lives, and we know how the story ends. We know that Jesus is the Son of God, and that at the end of the day He is actually much greater than either Moses or Elijah. Not so much for them.

More than that, Jesus is in an entirely different category from them. That was not so clear at the time of this incident for those who were seeing it for the first time. To the disciples who were with Jesus the big thing was Moses and Elijah. Only in retrospect do we understand those two to be inferior to That One. Not so much for them.

4. Having said that, it ought to be further noted that Peter’s desire to build exactly three “σκηνάς – tents” reflects his belief that Jesus is at least on the same playing field with these

two OT big guns. We further note that this is the same Peter who has just recently confessed Jesus to be The Christ, and by the time of his second epistle, seems to get it.

Peter likes it up on the mountain, and we get that. We can understand why he doesn't want to leave. It's the same reason why you never would have left that Doobie Brothers concert in 1974, and you would still be there if you could. They had left everything to follow Jesus, and it was a sometimes difficult ride, and he wanted this glorious moment to never end.

About those tents, Robertson (WP) thinks that the Feast of Tabernacles was near and Peter wanted to observe it here, and not in Jerusalem, but what's the point of that? Barclay spends seven pages on the Transfiguration without even getting anywhere near the question, which is one of the plethora of problems with commentaries.

Gundry, as usual, is more concerned with comparing parallels than dealing with things in the text that are important and to people like me unclear, and that's the problem with Gundry. Some commentators suggest that, at the least, staying up on the mountain would prevent them going to Jerusalem, where bad things were to happen to Jesus. That's right.

You know how it is when you're looking for a place to pitch your tent and you find one. This would be a good camping spot. Clearly Peter wants to stay here, and the word for what Peter wants to put up is "σκηνάς," which in Hebrews 11:9 means what we would call "tents." Peter wants to camp out here, and why not, given what awaits in Jerusalem.

5. While Peter is still talking, he is interrupted by a talking cloud. This is not the first cloud in the Bible. The cloud led Israel around during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 13: 21-22). Barclay seems to know a lot about clouds in the OT,

again in Exodus we read of the building and completing of the Tabernacle; and at the end of the story there come the words: 'Then the *cloud* covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Exodus 40:34). It was in the *cloud* that the Lord descended to give the tables of the law to Moses (Exodus 34:5). Once again we meet this mysterious, luminous *cloud* at the dedication of Solomon's Temple: 'And when the priests came out of the holy place, a *cloud* filled the house of the Lord' (1 Kings 8: 10, 11; cp. 2 *Chronicles* 5: 13, 14; 7:2). All through the Old Testament there is this picture of the cloud, in which was the mysterious glory of God."

So far Barclay and clouds.

The presence of the talking cloud is an indication of the presence of God among His people. The voice from the cloud says "Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα·

ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ - this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him.” The Father calls Jesus His Son, making Jesus God Himself, and directs us to listen to His words.

He also repeats what He has said at the Baptism of Jesus, and in how many people has the Father ever been “well-pleased.” The sample size is very large, and the number is very small. The voice then commands the hearers, two of whom are all-time great Prophets and three of whom are Apostles, to listen to Him, making that pecking order abundantly clear.

6. In response to hearing this, they hit the deck, “οἱ μαθηταὶ ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα – the disciples fell on their faces and were greatly terrified.” To fall on one’s face is to assume the posture of worship and fear, which Matthew tells us they also felt. Use words to make your hearers feel what those disciples felt.

7. Then Jesus “προσῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἀψάμενος αὐτῶν – came to them and touched them.” Sometimes you just need a hug. Was it a hug, or just a hand on the shoulder? A frightened child needs to be held. Often the best thing for an adult who has been startled or surprised or is afraid is for another adult to touch him before speaking to him.

He touched or held them, and then He told them to “Ἐγέρθητε καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε – get up and stop being afraid.” They don’t seem to have begun to be afraid until the cloud and the voice, and in fact Matthew tells us that it was upon hearing the voice say what it said – the Word of God – that caused them to bow down in fear as well as in worship.

It is noteworthy that these men had not been there at the Baptism of Jesus, and had not seen what happened there, nor had they heard that voice at that time. This is the first time they have heard the Father say what He does about the Son, and those words drove home the reality with which they had been living; that Jesus is actually the Son of God.

8. The words and the touch of Jesus caused them to rise up from their posture, and when they looked up, they saw “εἶδον εἰ μὴ αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν μόνον – no one except Jesus only.” The sentence structure emphasizes that Moses and Elijah were no longer there, and that Jesus was the solitary figure remaining with them. The glorious time has ended, for now.

9. What happens on the Mountain stays on the Mountain, and as they are descending the mountain, Jesus instructs the three not to tell anybody about this incident “ἕως οὗ ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθῇ – until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” Modern-day psychology majors clearly see the clever Jesus using reverse psychology.

That doesn’t seem like something that Jesus would do, and if that were the case then maybe when He tells us not to murder, He’s using reverse psychology and He really wants us to kill people and He wants us to have a lot of other gods besides the One True God. Talk about an argument that finds really poor traction on the most slippery of all slopes!

I think that what Jesus is getting at here is that He doesn't want them to tell anybody about this incident *until after He rises from the dead*. We see that the masses are already looking to Jesus as their food and cure ATM. Word of this incident would have served to draw more crowds to Him and for all the wrong reasons.

He knows that this event is best understood in light of the entire life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in fact it occurs in the midst of His relating word of that death and resurrection. He wants them to wait until the end of the story which is the earthly life of Jesus, and they do. Peter does, devoting several verses to it in his second epistle, the one read today.

Exodus 24 and the Transfiguration

<https://davidschrock.com/2018/01/30/reading-the-transfiguration-on-mount-sinai-a-comparison-between-exodus-24-and-mark-9/>

From a side-by-side comparison, we can see numerous parallels between Exodus 24 and Mark 9. Here are eight points of similarity that I see. (If you see more, feel free to share in the comments.)

1. **Mountains.** Both events are situated on high mountains—the Mount of Sinai and a high mountain in Northern Israel.
2. **Moses.** Both events involve Moses, and more specifically they involve God speaking to Moses. Curiously, the LXX puts Ἰησοῦς (Joshua or Jesus) on the mountain with Moses. Does this prefigure the conversation between Moses and Jesus? Let's just say it's interesting.
3. **Glorious cloud.** Both events reveal the glory of God in the form of a cloud. This also harkens back to Eden, another mountain of God (Ezek 28:13–14), where the Lord descended to walk in the “cool [lit. wind] of the day” (Genesis 3:8).
4. **Six days.** Both events transpire with respect to six days. In light of the connection [between the tabernacle and creation](#), this may link the Mount of Transfiguration to the creation as well. If so, is the revelation of God's glory in Christ related to a new creation? It is suggestive, especially if we consider God spoke on the seventh day (Exodus 24:16). Is he here also, *after* six days (i.e., on the seventh day), also speaking about his son—the one who will bring rest and reunion between God and man?
5. **A Voice.** Both divine encounters include God speaking from the cloud. The Lord's voice in Exodus 24 leads to instructions about the tabernacle (25:1ff), and the Father's voice in Mark conjoins Psalm 2:7 and Deuteronomy 18:15, identifying Jesus as the son of David and the prophet like Moses.
6. **Assistant(s).** Both events place the leading “mountain-climber” with an assistant(s). Moses ascends the mountain with Joshua (Exodus 24:13; 25:15 LXX); Jesus ascends with Peter, James, and John (Mark 9:2). In both instances,

- the witnesses of this glory are meant to share it with others. This is not an exclusive revelation, but one meant to lead people to know the God of glory.
7. **The Tabernacle.** Both events lead to discussion about a dwelling place for God. In Exodus, Moses is given instructions about God's tabernacle. In Mark Peter attempts to build a dwelling place for Jesus (Moses and Elijah), but like David's initiative to build a temple, it is denied (cf. 2 Samuel 7). God alone takes initiative in his temple-building—he did so in Exodus and in the Incarnation, he has also taken initiative to build a new temple.
 8. **The People.** Both events are followed by chaos in the valley below. After receiving the stone tablets and the instructions for the tabernacle, Moses returns to the golden calf. Similarly, Jesus returns from the mountain to find his disciples arguing with the scribes (Mark 9:14). Comparatively, the golden calf is worse, but in both instances chaos erupts below the mountain.

From these eight points of contact, we learn how the Mount of Transfiguration “copies” the events of Sinai. Or better, we might say the events of Sinai prepare the way for the Mount of Transfiguration, and the abiding presence of God dwelling with man. In fact, it is here in this comparison, that we discover at least two points of discontinuity that deserve consideration, and that help us understand what Mark is reporting and why this event is so important.

Law/Gospel

Not Pleased/Well Pleased – Because of sin, God is not pleased with us. Because of His holiness and lack of sin, the Father is pleased with the Son. Because the Son died on the cross and rose again, taking away our sin, the Father is pleased with us. If you want to talk about how, in Baptism, God is saying to you that He is “well pleased” on account of Jesus, go ahead and do that. Go ahead and quote Luther's Flood Prayer as well.

Down Low/Up High – This incident and what happens before and after are something of a microcosm of the Christian life. It's like a roller coaster. We are down low, and then we are up high. If we talk about hell as being always down and never up, only worse, and it will never end, and if we talk about heaven as being always up and never down, only better, and that it will never end, that may help people to better understand those two places.

No God/God Present – The natural man is without God, and not knowing the true God, he must make up false gods. The Jesus who comes to us in Word and Sacrament is “very God of very God.” We know Him because He has revealed Himself to us in Baptism and the Word, and in a way “much more certain” than the Transfiguration, Peter says. We could make the case that in the Sacrament of the Altar Jesus is “more present than ever,” as Dr. Kleinig (Australian Lutheran Church) has.

Sermon Titles

What Peter Saw

Cleverly Devised Myths?

Glamping with Jesus

Hymns

Anything from the *Transfiguration* section

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