

Matthew's account of the Transfiguration of Jesus begins "after six days", and so if we are going to understand the meaning and impact of this vision of Christ's glory, we need to ask "Six days after what?" And Matthew 16 gives us the answer: six days after Peter's Spirit-inspired epiphany about Jesus' identity – "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Six days after Jesus promised to build a Church that would connect heaven and earth. Six days after Jesus foretells His death and resurrection, and six days after challenging His followers to take up their cross until the Son of Man comes in His kingdom.

After six days had passed since Jesus explained His kingdom plans to His disciples, the seventh day came and Jesus took His disciples up on a high mountain. The actions here already picture for us a familiar sequence from the Old Testament: Jesus and His three mighty men are ascending the Hill of the Lord to meet with and worship God. In the Bible, that's what you do on the seventh day, and that's what you do on a mountain.

But this is something more than weekly worship: at key points in the history of the people of God, God meets with His prophets on a mountain and delivers kingdom plans to them that will change the course of Israel's history. We see this in the book of Exodus, when Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai to receive the covenant charter for God's people, and in 1 Kings 19, when God meets with Elijah to make plans for a dramatic transfer of power and the establishment of new kings in Israel. It isn't a coincidence at all that here on this mountain in Matthew 17 we find Moses and Elijah along with Jesus. God's pattern has been that the leaders of God's people ascend the mountain to worship and to receive kingdom plans, kingdom instructions from God.

And while many other features of the text are amazing, they are not surprising if you know your family history: A shining face? That's what happened to Moses when he met with God on the mountain. Glorious white clothing? That's what the prophet Daniel saw in his vision of the Ancient of Days, where one like a son of man came with the clouds of heaven before the ancient of days to receive dominion, glory, and a kingdom. Talk about making tents? Moses received instructions for the tabernacle at Mt. Sinai, a house for God that would connect heaven and earth.

And the bright cloud. The glory-cloud of God's presence. The bright cloud that led God's people out of Egypt. The bright cloud that allowed God's glory to come close to His people, but served as enough of a veil so that they were not overwhelmed by the fiery brilliance of God's holiness. The bright cloud that God wrapped around Mount Sinai for six days before He met with Moses. The bright cloud that would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent when God would meet with Moses later on, the signal for Israel to rise up and worship. The bright cloud in which the Lord would appear over the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. The bright cloud the High Priest couldn't approach unless he was wearing holy garments and until the sin offering and ascension offering had been made. The bright cloud that led Israel all throughout their wilderness wanderings. The bright cloud in which the Lord came down and put His Spirit on the elders of Israel. The bright cloud that filled Solomon's temple with unapproachable glory. The bright cloud

that covers over and blots out our sins. The bright cloud that rains down righteousness. The bright cloud that serves as a barrier to keep faithless prayers out of God's ears. The bright cloud that carried the son of man into the presence of the Ancient of Days to receive glory and a kingdom. The bright cloud that can turn dark and bring God's judgment in thunder and lightning and blackness and gloom. The cloud that overshadowed Mary when Jesus was conceived in her womb. The bright cloud that would accompany Jesus in His return in judgment on faithless Jerusalem, the bright cloud that every eye would see, even those who pierced Jesus. The bright cloud that took Jesus up into heaven out of the sight of His followers at His Ascension. The bright cloud that we will be caught up in to meet the Lord when He returns for us.

The bright cloud is God's chariot, in which He comes to meet with His people. The bright cloud is His garment, in which He wraps Himself so that glory doesn't overwhelm His people. The bright cloud is the symbol of God's presence. It is connected with worship; it is connected with God's Spirit; it connected with the voice of God. When the bright glory-cloud descends, God meets with and speaks to the leaders of His people, and gives them kingdom instructions.

That's what the bright cloud means, and that's why Peter, James, and John fall on their faces when the voice speaks out of the cloud. They are in the presence of God, and the one they have been following for the past several years is revealed in all His glory to be the Son of God! Now, just six days before, Peter had been correcting this man and His plans to go to Jerusalem and die! And now, God speaks out of the cloud and commands that they listen to Him! Earlier in Epiphany season, we heard again how God had spoken these same words at the baptism of Jesus: "This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!" And now the three apostles are given a vision of Jesus that enables them to see exactly why God is so pleased in His Son, and exactly why He is to be listened to. They see the glory of Jesus, and so they fall on their faces in terror.

But here's something amazing: because Jesus is with them, they don't need to be afraid. He comes over and touches them, and tells them to rise and have no fear. Can you imagine that? A few years ago, they were fishermen. Now, they are on an extremely short list of people who have stood in the presence of God inside the glory-cloud as welcome guests, as friends of God.

So what does this mean for us? How should we respond to the Transfiguration of Jesus? I want to draw out some points of application for us in the areas of worship, community, and mission.

First of all, what does the Transfiguration mean for our worship? Two things: The Transfiguration shows us *who* we worship, and has implications for *how* we worship:

In this vision on the mountain, Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God, not just by the Father's Word, but by sharing in the Father's glory. So when you think about Jesus, and when you are considering His word, are you taking His glory into account? This is the difference between Peter arguing with Jesus in chapter 16 and Peter falling on His face before Jesus in chapter 17. When we doubt Jesus' promises, or when we try to argue with His commands, we are treating Him as if He

were just another man. Maybe a teacher we respect, whose advice we appreciate, but still someone that we can have a different viewpoint from. But on the mountain, Jesus is revealed as the glorious Lord of the world. When He speaks, you do not evaluate His words. You do not weigh them in the balance, deciding how seriously you are going to take Him. You listen! You fall on your face and listen! This week, you will run into situations where Jesus has given a clear Word, and you will be tempted to respond to that Word like Peter in chapter 16, rather than Peter in chapter 17. But the glory of Jesus has been plainly revealed to you in the preaching of God's Word, and here are God's kingdom instructions for you: Listen to Jesus!

What about how we worship? The main point here is that the circumstances of our worship should reflect the glory of God. Each week in our worship, we ascend the hill of the Lord, and God speaks to us through His Word. Throughout the Bible, that meeting takes place in bright, shining brilliant glory, and that glory provokes a response of reverent awe. But I think this has a number of implications not just for our hearts and attitudes, but also for even more practical matters like church architecture and adornment. For the place where we worship to communicate the glory of God, it should be bright. Which is more glorious – the cross with the light off, or on? A dimly lit room, or a sanctuary filled with light?

Or how about this: when we meet for worship, what should we wear? Our culture still has the idea of wearing your "Sunday best", although it's fading. Should we let it fade? Should we join our culture in its rush toward the informal, the casual, comfortable, rather than the glorious, the best and brightest? In fact, look at me. Look at what I'm wearing, and look at what Jesus is wearing in verse 2. Am I wearing the right thing to communicate the experience of meeting with God on the holy mountain? I'm here to minister in Jesus' name. Am I representing Him appropriately?

Here's the point: **Jesus is a glorious Lord. Listen to Him, and worship Him gloriously.**

Second, what does the Transfiguration account mean for our community? For one thing, it means that we aren't supposed to stay up on the mountain. That seems to have been part of Peter's mistake in suggesting that he put up tents. It is good that we are here, but it isn't good for us to *stay* here, as some forms of retreatist or isolationist groups want to do. What we hear on the mountain is our kingdom agenda for the rest of life. When Moses came down from the mountain, the instructions he had been given created a culture, a way of life, for God's people. Jesus' kingdom agenda tells us who we're supposed to be! Heaven and earth come together in worship, and at that meeting point, we're given our marching orders for living on earth as it is in heaven. Our worship isn't about logging a few hours with God to get Him off our back so that we can keep on living the way we were before. Worship isn't an appointment with your parole officer! No, what we hear in worship determines how we live as a community. So don't ever think that being the people of God is something that takes place for a couple hours on Sunday, and then ends when you head back home or back to work. The point is to take what we learn on the mountain and then go back down and carry it out as a community. And so if worship is the only time you ever

see the other people in your church, then you're missing a big part of the point.

Worship is where we listen to Jesus. Community is where we live out what He told us together.

Third, what does the Transfiguration mean for mission? Look at verse 9: at the end of the account, Jesus tells Peter, James, and John “tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” It’s a bit enigmatic; we’re not sure why exactly Jesus says this, but I think that part of the reason is similar to the OT warnings that kept people away from the glory cloud, except for a select few. In the OT, the people couldn’t even look at Moses’ face after he had been in the presence of glory, and so he covered it with a veil. Even God’s High Priest couldn’t approach the mercy seat until atonement had been made, and so the ark was hidden behind a veil.

I think that’s a parallel to what’s going on here. Peter, James, and John have found a way into the glory cloud: follow Jesus. But that way is not open to everyone yet, until Jesus makes atonement for the sins of the world, until He dies and is raised from the dead. And I’m sure you remember what happened when Jesus hung on the cross: the veil that kept the mercy seat (which was where the glory cloud would come to rest) the veil that kept the mercy seat hidden from the rest of the world was torn in two. Open access to God’s mercy. Sinners can come into the presence of God, and now hear Jesus say, “Rise, and have no fear.” Which is what happens every week on this mountain after we confess our sins.

But since we live after the Resurrection, this means that we live in the time when the restrictions on sharing Jesus’ glory with the world are lifted! Now we invite *everyone* to draw near to God, because atonement has been made. Beholding the glory of Jesus in worship leads to mission: we gather on the mountain, we enter into the glorious presence of God by His Spirit, we behold the unveiled glory of Jesus, our clothes are washed white in the blood of the lamb, Jesus raises us up and tells us not to fear, and then we go down to live as God’s people, to overcome sin and evil, to build a Church, a holy community that serves as a house for God according to the blueprints we received on the mountain. And now that the Son of Man is raised from the dead, we tell *everyone* this vision of the glory of Jesus.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray: “O God, before the passion of your one and only Son you revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**”¹

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