

Sermon 3-3-19  
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The Transfiguration of Our Lord

**God Encounters**

Several weeks ago we defined what a prophet is. Do you remember? A prophet is a mouth for God. There's a reason why earth has had "mouths for God." God Himself is too intimidating and terrifying for the average citizen of earth.

For instance, just after Yahweh spoke the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, we read in Exodus 20:18-21, "18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.' 20 Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.' 21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was."

Now, we know from the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch or Torah, that Yahweh honored the peoples' request. He did not speak directly to the people again. However, this caused other problems. The people did not always listen to Moses. And the tremendous display of Yahweh's power at Sinai did not keep the people from sinning. Indeed, they had to wander forty years in the desert because they sinned against Yahweh. And they sinned against Yahweh often after that.

The terror they felt at Mount Sinai was not enough to keep Israel in the path of Yahweh's covenant and commandments. The reason is that our sinful nature is stronger than our fear and stronger than the Law. Only Jesus Christ is stronger than the sinful nature. That's what we're told in Romans 8:3. Therefore, when we sin against God, we always sin boldly. Just think of a small child boldly standing against a parent twice their size and you've got the picture. We're the only species on earth where a child will defy a parent. Indeed, if Yahweh were to appear to us in glory right now, the memory of it would not be enough to keep all of us from sinning ten years from now, and perhaps even later today. Such is the sinful nature we're born with.

Just like a small child willfully disobeys a parent and yet is terrified of the parent's authority, so it is with us before Yahweh. There are many who would draw near to Yahweh because they feel the emptiness that not having Him causes. Many are powerfully attracted by His love. Many desire the security of knowing that all things have a reason and a cause. However, when it comes to living and being holy as Yahweh is holy, well that's another matter.

Like Israel at Mount Sinai, Peter, James and John were confronted with a Theophany on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Theophany means a direct appearance of our Creator God before human eyes on this earth.

The disciples had gotten sleepy during an extended period of prayer with Jesus on that mountain. There's something very relaxing about prayer. Also, our sinful nature hates prayer and would rather shut us down with sleep.

But something happened that woke the disciples. Suddenly the exquisite colors and atmosphere of the pure, divine realm were revealed before their mortal eyes. Before the eyes of the disciples the mortal man, Jesus, was transfigured into the immortal God He is, and the immortal human He would become upon resurrection. Jesus was not transformed on the mountain. That would happen after three days in the tomb. He was only transfigured.

Still it was magnificent. Two other heavenly figures appeared with Jesus. How the disciples knew these were Moses and Elijah is anyone's guess. But they knew.

And, why Moses and Elijah? Elijah was transported to heaven directly without dying. Moses died on Mount Nebo, on the east side of the Jordan and Yahweh buried Him there. His grave is unknown to this day. So, one man has no grave and the other's is unknown. In their different times, each had gone up onto Mount Sinai at Yahweh's bidding. There, Yahweh had appeared in glory to both, although more directly to Moses. There, Yahweh spoke directly to both, although far more extensively to Moses. Moses was the Lawgiver. Elijah was one of the prophets sent centuries later to turn Israel from its evil ways and back to the Law of God. During their various ministries, both had fire fall from heaven to light fires upon altars. However, in Elijah's case the fire consumed not only the offering and the wood, but the very stones of the altar. Because of a prophecy in the book of Malachi, Elijah was expected as the forerunner of Messiah. We know that John the Baptist fulfilled that role. However, at every home Passover Seder to this day an empty place is still set for Elijah.

What Elijah and Moses discussed with Jesus is of primary importance to God's salvation history. We read in Luke 9:31, "They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." That means Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. The word fulfillment is used because in His passion and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled all of the prophecies made about the suffering Messiah.

Finally, at the Mount of Transfiguration a divine cloud came upon the mountain. It was not a thick darkness as at Mount Sinai. Instead we find out in Matthew 17:5 that it was a cloud of glorious light.

With this divine cloud of glory, terror entered the picture as it had at Sinai. We read in Luke 9:34-36, "34 While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.'" This event fulfilled the prophecy written by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:17-20, "17 The LORD said to me: 'What they say is good. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.'" Once Yahweh had spoken, the cloud dissipated and there was Jesus alone, back in the colors and mode of this mortal universe that Adam ruined with his sin.

Human beings have remained hungry for theophanies with God down through the ages. Sometimes Yahweh accommodates them. This has especially been true since the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. and the outpouring of Yahweh's Holy Spirit upon all flesh. In the aftermath of that day we read in Acts 2:43, "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." The word translated "awe" literally means fear in Greek. It can be translated, alarm, fright or terror. When the wall dividing us from the holy realms is pierced by Yahweh's grace, it can be terrifying.

But then there's Jesus. He personally was the greatest theophany of all time – God with us in the flesh. He came in mortal flesh so that He could approach people and people could approach Him. There are definite terrifying supernatural dimensions about His birth, His life, His ministry, His death and especially His resurrection and ascension. But in life and in death He was approachable. Even in His resurrected body He was approachable.

But for what purpose was He approachable? Way back, Yahweh said to Moses in Exodus 6:7, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." That has been Yahweh's purpose ever since.

Looking forward to a time that is not yet, it says in Revelation 21:3-4, "3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"

Jesus Himself said in John 14:23, "... 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'" So, from the beginning it has been the intention of our Creator – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to live with us and live within us. But, because of the sin we inherited from Adam that was not possible until Jesus.

As long as sin stood in the way, the only relationship we could have with our Creator was to be on the receiving end of His eternal condemnation, banishment and punishment. That's where the greatest terror and the fear still comes from for those without Messiah. But Jesus offered Himself to receive God's condemnation, banishment and punishment in our place. Being the Son of God, His six hours on a Roman cross were sufficient to do this for all people of all time.

As a result of this atoning work, Yahweh can now dwell with the believer. And the believer can now turn in prayer, praise, thanksgiving and love toward Yahweh. There is a mystical union between the believer and Jesus the Messiah. And theophanies of a certain kind still occur. We'll call them God encounters.

One kind of God encounter is now called the born-again experience. This is an awakening of the human spirit to the Lord. It occurs through the preaching of the Word and the work of Lord Holy Spirit. Depending on the spiritual state of the person prior to the experience, it can be considered a full conversion to Christianity, or a renewal of faith or a reminder of our Lord's real presence.

People who undergo this experience often speak of a great change in the direction of their lives, especially those who were unbelievers or lapsed believers prior to it. I believe one of the main reasons Yahweh gives this theophany to modern

people is because of the pagan worldview in which modern Americans have been educated and raised. Pagan indoctrination pushes Yahweh out of our lives entirely or moves Him to the fringes. It attempts to neutralize the power of God's gracious Word to us through fake news and vigorous anti-Christian propaganda.

The born-again experience frequently leads to a change in piety in a person's life. When the Lord draws close and we know it, how can we go on in the pagan worldview? Actually we can. And events in the Corinthian church were proof of that.

However, for the most part, worldview changes with this experience, and with it our presentation of ourselves to the world. The greedy can become generous – as in the fictional Ebenezer Scrooge character. The violent and vicious can become peaceful. Radio preacher, Raul Ruiz, testifies to this. Drunks can be delivered from the desperate cycles of alcoholism. The formerly sexually immoral of all types testify to the power of God in their lives as a result of this experience.

Back in late 1978 or 1979 I encountered a young woman my age who was the girlfriend of one of my parishioners. One day she told me her life's story. She was the daughter of a violent alcoholic and had all the scars to prove it. She had been a heroin addict for a number of months. Her sexual appetite had caused her to have three abortions. A clergyman had told her that she could not be forgiven for these abortions. As a result she went into a catatonic state for three months and spent months in a mental hospital. After such a tale of woe, I spoke to her about God's plan to forgive her sin through the atonement of Jesus Christ. As a good Lutheran pastor, I then led her through private confession of her sins and gave her absolution. Three days later we saw each other again, and the first thing out of her mouth was, "Ray. He's real!!" I said, "Pat. Who's real? What are you talking about?" She replied, "Jesus! He's real!" I was too startled to ask her how it had happened. But through that personal theophany her life took a different direction. I watched it happen. And it challenged me. The rest is the story of my life.

Myself, between 1979 and 1984 I had three experiences where I was directly addressed by the Lord with words. There was at least one more experience here in 1987 where I was not spoken to, but some things suddenly became as clear and beautiful as morning sunlight after a heavy rain. The fate of this congregation was wrapped up in that one. It's the reason today we're a bible believing congregation of The American Association of Lutheran Churches and not lost in liberalism.

These days, things mostly change for me through insight into God's Word and prayer. For, as I have said before, we're in a constant war of words. It's no different for me than it is for you. Who will I believe – my Creator or someone else? Who's words will I adopt at the core of my being – the Lord's or someone else's? Jesus died so that I might believe Him and not another. He died so that I might be His forever.

So, my piety is always changing – sometimes for the worse. But like the graph of a stock price that's increasing, a progressive upward line can be drawn across the daily and weekly peaks and valleys. That's the Lord's sovereign doing.

Understand this. No one will be saved by their piety. Salvation is the work of Jesus Christ alone. His forgiveness of sins does it all.

But no God-defying impious person will be saved. They will get the full descent into rebellion and evil that they desire. They will receive the eternal life without Yahweh they demand.

Salvation is from the Word alone and Lord Holy Spirit alone. It proceeds out of the preaching of Law and Gospel. Therefore, one doesn't need a theophany to believe the truth and so be set free. Indeed, The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian author, C.S. Lewis, wrote of going to the zoo with his brother. On the way to the zoo he was still running away from the Lord, resisting all he had read and heard about Jesus. On the way home, he realized that his resistance had somehow evaporated. The struggle was over, and he was a believer in Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life. There was no direct theophany of any kind – just Lord Holy Spirit completing His work in the heart.

The Lord pours out theophany as He wills upon whom He wills. Notice that in this morning's gospel only Peter, James and John were with Jesus when He revealed His eternal glory. Probably they told no one about the experience because they were afraid others wouldn't believe them. However, after the others had seen Jesus in His resurrected glory, the three made known what had happened that day. And that's how knowledge of the event comes to us.

Theophanies are special. They do cause awe. They do cause righteous fear of God. We are to welcome them when they come. But they are hardly daily or weekly events. Ultimately the joy of salvation and the mystical union of the believer with Jesus Christ is brought about by Holy Spirit engendered faith in God's Word and Sacraments. Personal piety also increases through the Word and Sacraments. For ultimately all the experiences in the world can't save us. God's Word alone can do that. So, this day. Who are you going to believe? Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.