

Listen to Him!
Matthew 16:28-17:13

Let's face it: nothing about the Transfiguration makes sense. Why did Jesus reveal His glory in this way, and why was it so temporary? Why did Elijah and Moses suddenly show up on the mountain to talk to Jesus and just as suddenly disappear? It's all so otherworldly, so beyond us.

But at the same time, it's obvious that Jesus intended for Peter, James, and John to see all this, for why else would He have taken them up on the mountain with Him? In fact, in the first verse of this passage, He told them that some would not taste death until they had seen the Kingdom of God in power – and if the Transfiguration wasn't a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, what is?

So, why did Jesus show Peter, James, and John all these things that were so hard to understand? Maybe He just wanted them to get a glimpse of His glory, to drive into their thick heads exactly Who He is. But if that's the case, then the reaction of the disciples may be the most confusing thing of all in this story.

For think about it. Jesus is standing over there glowing. And then Moses and Elijah show up. And the first thing Peter says is, "Lord, it is good for us to be here."

Really, Peter? Even in the presence of the Transfiguration, this overwhelming, mind-blowing vision of Christ's glory, you can't stop thinking about yourself? Even such a sublime, such a divine vision doesn't move you to self-abandonment, to worship, to praise? No. Instead of looking outward and upward, Peter's focus is relentlessly inward – not "How Great Thou Art," but, "It is good for us to be here."

But before we are too hard on Peter, are we really so very different? For if Peter saw a confusing and fleeting vision of Christ's glory, we have seen Jesus with much clearer eyes. For we know the end of the story. We know about the passion and justice of God displayed in the cross. We understand what confused the disciples so much in verse 9, for we have read of the triumphant splendor of the empty tomb. And because Jesus has already ascended into Heaven, we know that He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, a glory that will put the Transfiguration to shame.

We know all this, much more clearly than Peter did that day on the mountain. But day in and day out, is the focus of our lives so different from his? Do we really live a more worshipful existence than he did? Are we living for God's glory, or, like Peter, are we more concerned with what we can get out of this discipleship deal? Are we focused on serving Christ and bearing witness for Christ, or are we just grasping for the peace, the joy, or the contentment that He promises? Sure, we've heard the words of Christ, but are we really listening to Him any more than Peter was?

And then, of course, there's Peter's comment about the three tabernacles. What in the world is that all about? Gazing at the splendor of the glorious trio on the mountainside, how could Peter think they would possibly be interested in any sort of tent He could patch together on the spur of the moment? For the transfigured, glorified Christ to hang out in a shanty of sticks would be like the President of General Motors stepping out of his Cadillac Escalade, and then being offered a Big Wheel to ride on.

I wonder, though, if we don't at times fall into a similar snare, over-estimating the value of our own efforts. For even while we wander through the woods and forests, gazing on the grandeur and splendor of God's amazing creation, isn't it easy for us somehow still to indulge in the sin of pride, imagining that the world is only here for our use and enjoyment? And even when we meditate on the costly sacrifice of the cross, our redemption which Christ purchased at the price of His own blood, isn't it still somehow possible for us to imagine that our own feeble attempts at righteousness still matter, that we somehow still have the power to make ourselves acceptable in the sight of God or, at the very least, better than others?

So, maybe like Peter, we need to open our ears and listen, really listen, to what the Bible says about the seriousness of sin, about how deeply ingrained it is in our souls. Maybe if we would look, really look at the radiance

of Jesus' glory we would realize how far we have fallen from the image of God in which we were created. Maybe if we would look, really look at the dazzling white purity of his garments, we would get a clearer picture of how soiled and stained ours really are. Maybe then we would lose some of our pride and complacency and remember our weakness, how desperately we need Christ to reconcile us to God, making peace with Him through the blood of His cross.

But there's another possible reason that Peter mentioned building these tabernacles. Perhaps he wasn't just focused on what he could do to somehow be worthy in the sight of Christ. Perhaps he also desired to prolong that mountain-top experience. Perhaps he was hoping that by providing some lodging, he could make the glory and the splendor last a bit longer. That makes sense, for who among us wouldn't want to linger in such a transcendent moment?

But perhaps Peter's mention of these tabernacles indicates an even deeper longing. For the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles was the festival that celebrated, not just a past event, but a future one. This was the festival that not only looked back, remembering the way that God had delivered His people from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. No, the week-long celebration also looked forward to the time when God would deliver His people again, when He would return to earth to make real what the Tabernacle of Moses and the Temple of Solomon could only symbolize – the dwelling of God with His people. Yes, every year at the feast, the people remembered God's promise that He would pitch His tent alongside His people, not just symbolically for a week, but in a very real way forever and ever.

In short, Peter probably believed that, when Moses and Elijah showed up on the mountain with the glorified Christ, the Kingdom of God had finally come. For Peter, this was the culmination, the end of history. So, why not set up the tabernacles and settle down to celebrate the Kingdom of God in all its splendor!

Of course, we know why. We know why Moses and Elijah vanished into the cloud as suddenly as they had appeared, and why Jesus resumed His previous, merely human appearance. We know why the disciples could not linger on the mountaintop – there was much work left for Jesus to do. For after all, He hadn't come to earth to stay, not that time.

And that's exactly what He had been trying to explain to the disciples even before they went up on the mountain – that He was the Messiah, the Son of Man, but that He wasn't going to fulfill all their expectations, at least not right then. That's why the Transfiguration couldn't be permanent, at least not just yet. It wasn't time to build those tabernacles, because Jesus first had to suffer many things, and even die.

And that's why Jesus told them what He did about the coming of Elijah – that John the Baptist had in fact come in the spirit and power of Elijah to restore all things, just as Malachi had predicted he would. But the leaders of the day had not received his message – in fact, they hadn't listened to John any more closely than the disciples were listening to Jesus. Instead, King Herod had done to John whatever he wanted – throwing him in jail, and eventually putting him to death. And what had happened to John was going to happen to Jesus – that's what He was trying to tell His disciples.

But this wasn't the first time Jesus had told them all this, was it? Back in chapter 16 verse 21, Jesus had also made it clear that He must suffer and be rejected and be killed and rise from the dead before He could come again in glory. And through the impermanence of the Transfiguration, as well as by mentioning in verse 9 His need to rise from the dead, He kept trying to show His disciples the difference between his first and second coming.

But they didn't listen to Him. They continued to expect Him to bring blessings in this world, right then. They continued to expect Him at any moment to declare the Kingdom of God on earth, to expel the Romans and rule in Jerusalem. They wanted to build those tabernacles, and celebrate the coming of the Kingdom in all its fullness – right then.

And so this may just be the most confusing thing of all about the Transfiguration: how in the world could these disciples follow Jesus, see His miracles, hear his words, believe that He was the Messiah sent from God, and

even catch a vision of His glory – how could they do all this without really listening to Him? And even when God the Father Himself descended from heaven in a terrifying cloud and spoke directly to them, just as He had thundered to Moses from the top of Sinai, they were still clueless. Even when the Father said, “This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him!” – they didn’t listen.

In fact, they didn’t really listen for the rest of gospel of Matthew. Oh, sure, they followed Jesus for awhile, until they could no longer deny that He had come not for a crown, but for a cross. For when they saw Him meekly surrender to Judas and the mob, when all their hopes of earthly glory finally vanished, they abandoned Him. No, they never did listen – not until He had risen from the dead.

So Christians, what will it take for us to listen? Sure, we know that Jesus is the Son of God. But what will it take for us truly to listen to Him? What will it take for us to gaze upon His shining white garments? What will it take for us to recognize and reject the remnants of sin in our own lives, to turn away from ourselves to worship and glorify Him alone?

And sure, we know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the World. But what will it take for us to listen to Him? What will it take for us to trust in Him alone to save us, putting aside all our feeble attempts to earn God’s favor and resting in the all-sufficient sacrifice of His cross?

And sure, we know that Jesus is the Son of David, the One Who holds all power in Heaven and on Earth in His hands. But what will it take for us to listen to Him? What will it take for us to put aside our fear and worry and to trust Him to provide for us in His way and in His time? What will it take for us to put aside our demands for immediate happiness and comfort in this world? What will it take for us to give our lives completely to Him, living only for His glory, even if suffering or persecution comes our way as a result?

Our Messiah has been revealed to us in glory. He has come to save us from sin and death. The Son of God has come to rule and to reign over every aspect, every corner of our lives. And while we wait for His return, He calls us to follow Him, even to the cross of self-denial and self-sacrifice.

The One Who speaks is our Savior and our Shepherd, our Lord and our King. Today, will we trust in Him? Will we listen to Him?