

Sermon by the Rev. Eric Moulton
St. John's Episcopal Church
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LAMP LIFE 6.0

Mark 9:2-9 | 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Several years ago, when Nike signed him to a lifelong endorsement deal, LeBron James became the focal point of an ad campaign of Biblical proportions—billboards, television, magazines, internet, T-shirt's and other print media with the bold statement regarding LeBron's athletic greatness. Borrowing scriptural language, the ad simply said: *We Are All Witnesses*. Witnesses to what? In this case, to the basketball glory of LeBron James, undoubtedly one of the greatest to ever play the game. Now, whether that was clever or appalling from a marketing perspective is not my point, but there is something powerfully illustrative for us. Those who have been able to see LeBron on the court in a live game or have seen his talent on live TV through his career, well, they are the witnesses of his basketball greatness, his glory, if you will. Now, this is a very pale comparison to what is going on in our passage today on the mount of transfiguration, but keep it in mind for a moment.

We are in our final Sunday after the Epiphany. The season of Lent begins this coming week, starting with Ash Wednesday. So, today is our final message in our Lamp Life sermon series. We began Epiphany with the Magi offering prophetic gifts to the infant Christ child—a foreshadow of Jesus' ministry to come. We explored various aspects of God's self-disclosure, that is, how God reveals himself to us, and how our own identities are discovered in the light of God's love and eternal purpose. We moved from God's act of creating the world to his heart for redeeming that same world that had fallen into a fractured state through sin and death. We explored how the light of God's revelation not only helps us see God but also helps us see ourselves as well. In fact, as God would have it, you can't have one without the other! To know yourself fully is to know God, and to know God is to discover your own identity!

And what we discover along the way is how the gospel of God, how Christianity, addresses the question of human longing, which is at the heart of God's revelation! I was scrolling my Instagram feed last Monday morning when I noticed a post from renowned skateboard legend **Nyjah Houston**. I am one of his 4.5 million followers. The post was a picture of him looking out toward a beautiful ocean sunset through a glass-paneled wall. The caption simply said: *Why Are We Here?* His post had more than 20K responses and comments, one of which was mine inviting him to online Alpha.

His question is at the heart of the Epiphany season. The light of Christ is a light of discovery—not only of the personhood of God and of our own personhood, but also of our created and redeemed purpose in the relationship we share together.

At the heart of all God's activity and investment with us is the promise of his word and the fulfillment of those promises in his mighty acts. This motif of promise and fulfillment runs throughout scripture and is prominent across the long arch of redemptive history. This is the significance of epiphany. It is the moment of revelation where God's work in creating and redeeming comes together in a way we can understand and receive. God invites us by letting us in on it! He wants you in on it. He wants Nyjah Houston in on it. He wants your neighbor and co-worker in on it. It's why we describe the gospel as a lens of understanding. Through the gospel we see God, ourselves and the world in a brand new light.

The Transfiguration is one of THOSE passages in the Bible. You know, the kind that make you go, huh? What just happened here? I mean, we see it but we're scratching our heads, wondering what we just witnessed. When we see LeBron with a no-look pass or a gravity defying dunk, we're pretty certain about what we're seeing. It is basketball greatness. But Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? We're looking at something else. We're looking at Divine Glory. It begs a lot of questions, especially without proper context. If this were the first thing we ever read in scripture, we would be confused. Set in context, however, this event serves to bring us a snapshot of how God is working to bring everything full circle. In fact, this passage is so full of symbolic connections between old covenant promise and new covenant fulfillment, we could unpack this for weeks.

Fortunately, Paul the Apostle summarizes the meaning of Jesus' glory so well in his words to the church in Corinth. Paul says in **2 Corinthians**,

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Here Paul drew a direct line from God's glory as creator to the glory of God as Savior in the very face of the redeemer, Jesus.

So let's set the context of this transfiguration. At the end of **Mark 8**, Jesus asks the disciples who the crowds say that he is. Then he asks the disciples who they say he is. If you're familiar with this story, you know that Peter famously answers, *You are the Christ, the Messiah*, which was a Spirit-inspired answer. Then Jesus begins to describe an ordeal of suffering that was ahead for him, which included a betrayal, arrest, trial and death, followed by an eventual resurrection.

Hearing this, Peter is appalled! Peter tells Jesus, no way this is gonna happen to you!—but Jesus rebukes Peter: *Peter's view is limited. Peter only has in mind the things of this world and doesn't have in mind the things of God.* Jesus begins to teach that not only is he going to suffer, but that all who would come after him must deny themselves, take up their spiritual crosses and follow him.

And then this curious statement: Jesus says, *There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.* There is a lot of debate about what Jesus meant and how this was fulfilled. The fulfillment happens at the transfiguration. Mark's gospel reports that six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain, north of Caesarea Philippi, probably Mount Hermon, and there something insanely wild takes place. Jesus is transfigured—he becomes dazzlingly white, whiter than white laundry white, gloriously radiant! As Peter, James and John are looking on, Moses and Elijah appear before Jesus. A cloud of glory rests on them, like the Shikinah glory of God that filled the tent of meeting, which led the children of Israel. In the Old Testament, clouds are signs of God's presence, protection and authority. In the New Testament, clouds signify the return of Christ. In this glory-cloud a Holy conference was going on. Elijah and Moses represent the two dominant aspects of life in the Old Covenant: Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the prophets. Both Moses and Elijah experienced being near the glory of God: Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah on Mt. Horeb. They were towering figures in redemptive history—servants of the Lord, used mightily of God.

Moses and Elijah were huddling up with Jesus, which explains why Peter—in complete terror and awe and nervousness—suggests that it's good to see this and perhaps they should build three shelters, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus. Peter didn't know what to say or think. The word for shelter is the same word used to describe a tabernacle, perhaps as a way of containing the glory so that it didn't strike them dead, which is what would have been on his mind. It was believed that no one could stand in the presence of the glory of God and live. In the Old Testament, the presence and glory of God dwelt in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Moses, on Mt. Sinai, wanted to see God's glory, but God made him turn his back as his glory passed by, because Moses would not have survived it. As he descended the mountain, Moses' face was radiant from having been close to God's glory. Now, here was Jesus, consumed in the very glory of God. Peter's offer to make three dwellings also suggests that he viewed Moses and Elijah as equals with Jesus. That idea was short-lived, when from the heavens the voice of the Father spoke, saying, *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.* It was an echo of the same announcement the Father made at Jesus' baptism: *My Son. Hear Him!*

- Jesus is not an exemplary law-abider like Moses. Jesus is perfect obedience to the law. Jesus is the law-giver and the only law-abider.
- Jesus is not a great prophet like Elijah. He is the very word of God, incarnate.
- Jesus is not an equal to Moses and Elijah. Jesus is the true Lord of both Moses and Elijah.
- Jesus is not just a great example of law-keeping and prophetic announcement. He is the very fulfillment of all the law and the prophets.
- Jesus is not just able to be in the presence of God's glory and live, He is the very glory of God.

Jesus fulfilled ALL the law. As the faithful son of the Father, he loved God with all his heart in all he did and said, and he loved his neighbor in all he did and said. That is why, after conferring with Jesus, both Moses and Elijah fade away in the moment of transfiguration and the voice of the Father commands the disciples: *Listen to him!* When they finally build up the courage to lift their eyes again, all the disciples can see is Jesus.

Of all the events Peter experienced with Jesus, it was this one that Peter wrote about. In **2 Peter 1:6-19**, Peter reflects on this incredible moment in which he witnessed the majesty of Jesus. Peter wrote:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but 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. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

As to a lamp shining in a dark place! What the disciples were beginning to see was that Jesus was not just a representative of God, but God himself...not just a reflection of the light, but the light itself... not just an ambassador of the the King, but the great monarch himself, clothed in human flesh.

The writer of **Hebrews** described Jesus in this way:

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. Jesus isn't the greatest servant of the Lord, he is The Lord who came to serve.

As Jesus turns to his march toward Jerusalem, where he knows the cross is looming, the transfiguration was a moment of final affirmation, confirmation and encouragement from the Father toward the identity and mission of the Son. And it was a foretaste of the radiant Glory of God that will accompany Jesus at his second coming.

Again, this is what Peter was so adamant about:

We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of Heaven with our very own ears. We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard—God's glory, God's voice. The prophetic word was confirmed to us. You'll do well to keep focusing on it. It's the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morningstar in your hearts.

In the moment, on the mountain, what was it that Peter, James and John experienced? Tim Keller argues that they experienced worship! He says, *Worship is a preview of the thing that all of our hearts are longing for, whether we know it or not.*

This is Worship—witnessing the glory of God and not dying because you are there with Jesus. You are there because of Jesus. You are there to worship Jesus. This is why Nyjah Houston's question is so common and yet so important in the human journey. *Why Are We Here?*

In his great essay, *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis wrote

...the promise of glory becomes highly relevant to our deepest desire. For glory means good rapport with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things.

When we worship Jesus Christ, the Light of the World—when we worship by the Spirit—we enter into the glorious presence of God. We experience, by grace through faith, a foretaste of the glory to come.

When we started the Lamp Life series, one of the ways we described the Christian life was that we live in this present age as if the age to come were already a reality. The transfiguration on the mount had to be a source of great encouragement to Jesus, who knew it was only a preview of his glorified resurrection and exaltation—but here's the twist: Jesus had to come down from the mount. The journey of suffering, scorn and even death still lay before him. The cross would come first, then the crown. Jesus told Peter, James and John not to speak of this until after the resurrection. Hearing this, the disciples scratched their heads, wondering what on earth this "rising from the dead" was all about.

Next week, we take a turn, liturgically, from Epiphany light to the wilderness of the season of Lent. We turn our attention to the depths of our own fallenness and to the heights of Kingdom servitude and self-denial, as we follow Jesus, the Lord who came to serve.

In his final months before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, Jesus probably reflected more than a few times on the experience of the mount of transfiguration, knowing that beyond the veil of his suffering and death lay a glorious joy ahead. Like Jesus, we too are witnesses by faith of his glory and participants in the long and patient suffering that comes in following Christ. For those who worship Christ, the pattern is the same—the disciple's cross before the crown.

Here is the good news wrapped in a great mystery. The Lamp of Christ is always on, always shining. No matter how dark your darkness may seem, there is one who has travelled before you—and we are all witnesses. As Peter said, *You will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

So, as you walk through the wilderness of life, don't be overwhelmed by the darkness—keep your eyes fixed on the Lamp, who is Jesus the Lord, and keep on walking. The glorious, marvelous light of a glorious, marvelous savior is on the way. To his presence and goodness, his forgiveness and blessing, through the Gospel, we are all witnesses.

Amen.