

July 29-August 2, 2024 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 135

The Transfiguration: Listen To Him!

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we're looking at the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. This story takes center stage in the gospels. Everything up until this point is Jesus showing the disciples His power and authority. Once He gains their trust and faith He starts sharing with them exactly what it means that He is the Christ/Messiah. The transfiguration is one of the first events where Peter, James & John are given a peek behind the curtain that has shrouded the true nature of the Messiah and what He had come to do. So let's just start with reading the entire story (it's not that long):

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them. Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus. Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three tabernacles- one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them. As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by "rising from the dead." Then they asked him, "Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?" Jesus responded, "Elijah is indeed coming first to get everything ready. Yet why do the Scriptures say that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be treated with utter contempt? But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they chose to abuse him, just as the Scriptures predicted." Mark 9:2-13 (NLT)

You might remember the last event in the chronological story of Jesus' life if you read last week's reflections- Jesus took His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi and asked them who they believed Him to be. Peter made the great confession that Jesus was the Christ. Almost immediately Jesus starts explaining the misunderstanding the Jews had about what the Messiah/Christ would do. Turns out the Messiah would be a king but unlike any king the disciples (or anyone in Israel for that matter) had ever imagined. Jesus would not be a king on a throne- at least not at first. First He would be the King on a cross. He would suffer and be sacrificed but (and this part the disciples seem to have not heard) on the third day He would rise from death.

When Jesus says these things Peter rebukes Him. Not on my watch, Lord! I'll never let that happen. I'll take a sword and lop off some ears if I have to (ok he didn't say that but you can see where Peter's head is at and in the garden of Gethsemane we get to see where Malchus' ear is at- spoiler alert it'll be on the ground until Jesus picks it up and reattaches it). After Peter's rebuke Jesus rebukes him right back. He's pretty brutal in the way He talks to Peter but this is a very important lesson for Peter and all of the disciples- you don't rebuke the King of kings. Especially when you can see He's starting to feel the stress of what's coming.

But is Jesus finished with Peter? Not even close. Turns out that Jesus never gives up on us even when we demonstrate how epically we misunderstand Him. Eight days later Jesus

takes Peter along with the other two of His inner circle of disciples- James and John- to bear witness to one of the strangest and most important stories in the gospels. We'll spend this week digging into the lessons of the transfiguration but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on what you think might be going on in this story. What did the transfiguration mean for Jesus and what does it mean for us?

Tuesday Reflection: So yesterday we started looking at the story of the transfiguration. Today we'll begin unpacking what the transfiguration teaches us because it is filled with imagery from the Old Testament. The first thing I want to talk about this week is that the transfiguration teaches us Jesus' true identity. It's a snapshot of who He is and what He came to do (which will be the next lesson we learn from Him in this story). So let's take a look at how the story begins:

** As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus. Matthew 17:2-3 (NLT)*

What's the deal with the blinding brightness of Jesus at the transfiguration? Well let's begin with how God was often seen in the Old Testament. Generally in the Old Testament God is seen as a blinding light (and when He's seen as something almost human in appearance it's probably a visit from Jesus- not the Father but we'll unpack that as we go along today) as the Israelites experienced Him in the Exodus:

The Lord went ahead of them. He guided them during the day with a pillar of cloud, and he provided light at night with a pillar of fire. This allowed them to travel by day or by night. Exodus 13:20 (NLT)

I've often wondered if the glory cloud that represented the presence of God with His people was sort of like a dusk-to-dawn light that turns off when the sun comes out and turns on when the sun goes away. But I'm starting to wonder if the cloud never changed- only its appearance was different. What if the cloud was like the moon when it comes out in the daytime? The sun isn't shining on the moon any less when you can see it in the sky during the day but it sure seems like it is. What's the difference? The amount of ambient light. It doesn't really matter but it is something that I wonder about. In any event, as the Israelites were coming out of Egypt the glory cloud was a constant reminder that Yahweh was with them. Then when they get to Mt. Sinai the cloud descends upon the mountain of the Lord- and Moses:

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Exodus 24:15-17 (NLT)

It looked like a consuming fire, but just like the burning bush- the fire didn't consume Moses or the mountain. But God warned the Israelites that if they so much as touched the mountain they would be killed instantly. But even Moses couldn't see God completely. And when Moses asked to see God's "glory", God explains why that just wasn't possible at that point in time:

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." Exodus 33:18-23 (NLT)

When I was a kid we sang a hymn at our church called A Wonderful Savior Is Jesus My Lord. There was a line in the chorus that went, "He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock... and covers me there with His hand". Before I could read and I just heard the lyrics I thought it was saying "He clobbers me there with His hand". Didn't sound like a wonderful savior to me at that point. But what's funny to me now is, that's the impression we've got of God, isn't it? Like Him telling us that we can't see His face and live is some kind of strange quirk God has. Like if we see His face He'll get really angry and destroy us. But it's not like that at all as it turns out. Turns out, the weight of His glory would be too much for us to withstand as humans so God protects us by shielding us from the full weight of His glory (more on that Thursday).

So back to the transfiguration. Peter, James and John watch while Jesus begins to shine so brightly that nobody could even look at Him. It had to remind them of the glory of God that was revealed so often in the book of Exodus. But here is the glory of God on full display before them and what happens? What's different about this situation? Well, the glory is coming from a human (or one "like" a son of man) now. And just as importantly, nobody is getting croaked from seeing it happen. We'll get into the rest of the imagery tomorrow but for today maybe let's spend some time reflecting on what it means that the glory of God is now contained in Jesus rather than other ways that God protected us humans from the full weight of His glory in the Old Testament.

Wednesday Reflection: So we looked yesterday at how the transfiguration began with Jesus' face shining like the sun. Then two very special guests arrived on the scene- Moses and Elijah. Why Moses and Elijah? Well there are many good answers to that question but one really good one is that they both had interactions with the glory of God on a mountaintop- Moses' on Mt. Sinai and Elijah's on Mt. Horeb. But most scholars believe it's the same mountain for both Moses and Elijah. We'll never know but the two visitors on Jesus' mountain of transfiguration (not Sinai or Horeb but wouldn't that have been cool?) gives us some insight into what's going on. When Moses spends time with God the brightness of His glory is so intense it causes something very strange to happen to Moses:

When Moses came down Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, he wasn't aware that his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the Lord. So when Aaron and the people of Israel saw the radiance of Moses' face, they were afraid to come near him. Exodus 34:29-30 (NLT)

The glory of God is illuminating the face of Moses even after He leaves Yahweh's presence. In fact it was so bright that it was freaking out the Israelites and Moses had to start wearing a veil over his face to tone down the illumination. But in the story of the transfiguration the illumination is coming from Jesus Himself. Why? Because now Jesus contains the glory of God. Look at what the book of Hebrews says about it:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV)

Jesus Himself is the radiance of God's glory. He's not reflecting that glory- He's containing that glory. Imagine it- a human (or at least one "like" a human) that not only can stand in the brilliance of God's glory but a human who contains God's glory. It's mind boggling- at least it would've been for the Israelites. Now in Jesus the glory of God resides in a human and while it amazed the Israelites it was an objectionable thought for the gentiles who were steeped in Roman/Greek philosophy. Greek philosophy believed- like the Israelites- that there was a source of ultimate reality in the universe. They called that ultimate reality the "Logos". It was an impersonal force that simply defined reality. They taught that if a human was going to become all they had could be they had to align their lives with that Logos or they would never excel.

But while they pretty much all agreed on the power of the Logos they differed on what it was. They disagreed on what ultimate reality was. The Stoics believed that the reality of this world was an impersonal force that rewarded those who didn't become attached to anything in this world. Anything. The most famous Stoics remained detached from everything and everyone in their lives. Their number one loyalty was to their "duty" and woe to anyone or anything that tested their resolve. But there was another popular school of philosophy, the Epicureans. They believed that at the heart of reality was the concept of fun and joy. So the Logos (for them) demanded that they put pleasure above everything else. And woe to anyone or anything that got in the way of an Epicurean's fun.

But while the Greeks disagreed about what the Logos required of them they all agreed that this source of ultimate reality was an impersonal force. Then the Christians come along and they agree with the Greeks that there is a source of ultimate reality and the apostle John even uses the Greeks' own terminology to try to explain who/what that source of ultimate reality is. At the beginning of his gospel John writes this:

In the beginning the Word (the Logos) already existed. The Word (the Logos) was with God, and the Word (the Logos) was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word (the Logos) gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. John 1:1-5 (NLT)

The word John uses to describe Jesus in the opening lines of his gospel is "Logos". Interestingly this first part of the book of John was actually one of the earliest Christian

hymns (but their singing would have sounded more like a Gregorian chant than our modern 4 part harmonies). This passage gives us some profound insight into who the earliest Christians believed Jesus to be. He was the Logos. The source of ultimate reality. The Christians agreed with the Greeks that the Logos was ultimate reality with which one must align his/her life in order to find ultimate purpose and satisfaction in this life. But unlike the Greeks the Christians believed the Logos to be not only a personal force but- well, a person:

So the Word (the Logos) became human and tabernacled among us. He was full of unfailling love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. John 1:14 (NLT)

This drove the Greeks mad. How could the Logos be a person? That would've been one of the craziest things the Greeks had ever heard. Throw into that mix that the Logos came to this earth and became a human and lived the life of a servant who would eventually die on a cross. It was the most foolish thing in the world to the Greeks so how did this Christian "philosophy" change the world? I think it was able to change the world because of how compelling the idea was. If the Logos was a person who stepped into our world to save the souls of all humanity then life isn't about what the Stoics nor the Epicureans believed. If the Logos was who the Christians claimed then the point of this life is to align ourselves with that person and live the way He did. Which means love is at the center of ultimate reality.

Do you know what that shift did for our world? It demonstrated the worth of every individual human being. Just about every scholar on earth believes that Jesus and His church's impact on the world is what has led to the culture of human worth and human rights in this world. Whether we know it or not Jesus' fingerprints are all over western culture. The glory of God- ultimate reality- contained in a human who came to this earth to give His life for every human who would ever live. It was mind boggling and ridiculous to the Greeks and yet it was Jesus who changed this world more profoundly than any other teacher or religious leader. Tomorrow we'll continue looking at the lessons of the transfiguration but today let's spend some time reflecting on what it means that the Logos came to this earth not to be served but to serve us.

Thursday Reflection: So far this week we've been looking at how the transfiguration teaches us about Jesus' true identity. Today I want to look at another lesson from this story- it also shows us Jesus' true mission. It teaches us why the Logos- the ultimate reality of the universe- came to this world. In order to understand it let's go back to the Old Testament for a minute. If you remember wayyy back to last Tuesday Moses at one point asks Yahweh, "show me Your glory". Yahweh responds that it would be too much for a human to bear to see and feel the full weight of His glory. This theme runs throughout the entire Old Testament. When Isaiah has his vision in the Temple he only sees the very bottom of Yahweh's robe and he's absolutely sure he's done for:

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Isaiah 6:5 (NIV)

The Israelites had it drilled into their consciousness that you can't see God and live to talk about it. Nobody other than Moses ever asked God for a clear view of His glory because nobody wanted to die. It really bothers us westerners when we see God saying that if somebody is unlucky enough to look directly into His glory that that person will die. But it's not vindictiveness. God isn't saying, "if you look at me I'm going to kill you!" There are some famous divas in the music and entertainment industry that will have things written into their contracts that nobody can look directly at them while they're doing their thing. God isn't a diva. He's not going to punish you if you happened to look directly into His glory. So why would someone die if they did see God's glory?

The same reason you'd die if you stood under a piano while it was being hoisted by rope into a 15th story apartment in New York City and the rope snapped and fell on you. Nobody would blame the piano for killing you- in fact we'd say, "why was he standing under that piano in the first place?" It's interesting to me that one of the literal definitions for the Bible word for "glory" is weight. I have an office chair that I love but it's probably 15 years old at this point. I've had to repair it a couple of times because the bolts that hold the back of the chair to the seat of the chair are a weak link. One time I was leaning way back in that chair when the bolts snapped, the back of the chair went flying and so did I. Why? What happened? Turns out my "glory" was too much for that chair and so the chair broke. I repaired the chair with much higher grade bolts and I'm happy to say my glory hasn't broken that chair in years. But you get the picture, right?

God's glory is fatal to us not because He wants it to be but because in our fallen state we can no longer withstand the full weight of His glory. Being exposed to that full weight of His glory would destroy us. I wonder if that's a big part of why Adam & Eve had to leave Eden after they brought sin into this world and that changed everything about their reality. God couldn't let them remain in Eden because His glory was too heavy for them after the fall. And thereafter if a human was exposed to the full weight of His glory, well to use imagery from old gangster movies, it'd be curtains (pronounced coy-tans) for them.

So in order to remain close to His people while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years during the days of the Exodus God had Moses make something that would shield the Israelites from the weight of His glory. It was called the Tabernacle and when it was completed we read this:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle... So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels. Exodus 40:33-38 (NLT)

The Tabernacle of God was not only the visible reminder of God's presence with His people- it was a way of God shielding us humans from a glory so glorious it would be fatal for us to see. God is saying, I want to dwell with My people but I don't want them to die. So the Tabernacle will be not only the visible reminder of my presence with the Israelites but it will be My way of shielding them from the weight of My glory. Ok, now let's return to the mount of transfiguration. When Peter sees what's happening he is understandably

terrified. But when the glory of God descends upon the mountain and they aren't immediately killed Peter begins to sense what's truly going on:

Peter exclaimed, "Rabbi, it's wonderful for us to be here! Let's make three tabernacles—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He said this because he didn't really know what else to say, for they were all terrified. Then a cloud formed and overshadowed them. Mark 9:5-7 (NLT)

Why does Peter want to build three tabernacles? Because while he may not understand everything that's going on he does sense it has something to do with the glory of God and Jesus Himself. Does Peter sense somehow that God's glory is now contained within Jesus Himself? Just eight days before this Peter finally recognizes and speaks out loud his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Are Peter's eyes continuing to be opened gradually? Maybe. Probably. I'm guessing Peter is thinking that God's glory needs a tabernacle so that it doesn't destroy the humans and so he suggests building one. Maybe it was more self preservation than deep theological insight but it turns out he needn't have worried about self preservation at that point in history because now the glory of God doesn't need a tabernacle built by humans to shield us from its weight. At this point we discover that Jesus is the tabernacle of God. We looked at this on Wednesday but let's take another look:

So the Word (the Logos) became human and tabernacled among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. John 1:14 (NLT)

When John says that Jesus "tabernacled" among us he's using vivid Old Testament imagery. The old Tabernacle of God was a tent (and eventually a Temple in Jerusalem) that was designed to shield us humans from the full weight of God's glory. But now Jesus is the one who shields us from the weight of that glory. He is the new Tabernacle of God. We'll spend some time tomorrow looking at what all of this means but for today let's spend some time reflecting on what it might mean for us that Jesus is the new Tabernacle of God.

Friday Reflection: So yesterday we looked at how Jesus became the new Tabernacle of God- He contained the full weight of the glory of God but its true power was tucked away safely within Him. He is the reason we are able to approach God. I never used to recognize this but I'm sure that this was as much a relief for God as it was for us. God's deepest desire has always been to dwell among us humans. It didn't work out in Eden but as soon as we blew that whole deal God got busy putting another plan in motion. A plan that would mean His glory once more could reside among us. But how did Jesus make that a reality? Why can we now approach the throne of God in prayer with confidence that we won't be destroyed by the weight of His glory? Because Jesus was willing to lose His glory so we could receive it. When Jesus died on the cross something truly remarkable happened- He was plunged into darkness. He was willing to lose His glory so that we could have access to the glory of God:

Then Jesus shouted out again, and he released his spirit. At that moment the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Matthew 27:51 (NLT)

What just happened? What is this veil that was torn? It was the veil that God had Moses place within the Tabernacle (and eventually the Temple itself) that separated the Tabernacle/Temple from the Holy of Holies- the place where the glory of God dwelled. A place even the priests couldn't see into because it would have been too much for even them. But now, with Jesus' death that veil is torn from top to bottom. I think Matthew makes sure to describe the direction of the tear so there would be no question about who did the tearing. That veil is no longer necessary. Jesus not only contained the full weight of the glory of God- He had also become the Tabernacle/Temple Himself. We see it clearly in his interactions with the religious leaders early on in Jesus' ministry:

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. John 2:19-22 (NIV)

Nobody understood for years what He meant by that but after the resurrection the disciples remembered that run-in with the religious authorities and understood a little bit more of who Jesus is. But the Temple that is Jesus no longer has a veil separating us from God- in fact now that Jesus has torn the veil something remarkable has happened:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV)

Do you know that? Do you know that if you are a follower of Jesus then you are God's temple and that His Spirit dwells within you? It's a remarkable turn of events. Now not only are we not destroyed by the weight of God's glory- we ourselves now somehow contain that glory within our own bodies. Just like Jesus. How is that possible? John gives us some unique insight into that process as well. On the night before Jesus would die He prayed in Gethsemane. He was in agony over what was coming. But was He thinking about Himself? Not much He wasn't. He spent the majority of that time praying not for Himself but for His disciples- both the ones with Him that night in Gethsemane and the ones who would come later because of what His first disciples taught us about Him. Look at this amazing part of His prayer:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one- as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. "I have given them the glory you gave me." John 17:20-22 (NLT)

Did you catch that last part? He has given us the glory that God gave to Him. And now that glory resides within us. We no longer need to be shielded from God's glory. Because of what Jesus did that glory isn't lethal- in fact it's life giving now. And without it you and I will never recognize our full potential. So what does all of this mean? What should be our response? Well the story of the transfiguration also gives us the answer to that question- from God's own voice:

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them. Mark 9:7-8 (NLT)

What does God ask of us now that we have access to the full weight of His glory? It's actually pretty simple. He says, "listen to Him". That's it. That's all God asks. Now listening is more than just hearing what He says. The idea of listening in the Bible involves not just hearing Him but doing what He says. So let's end our time on the mount of transfiguration by reflecting on a very important question- how well are you doing at listening to Him. I know, ouch. I feel your pain. Thank God He doesn't just give up on us when we fail at listening.

