

MATTHEW 17:1–9. (EHV)

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James; and he led them up onto a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured in front of them. His face was shining like the sun. His clothing became as white as the light. Just then, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Just then, a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell face down and were terrified. Jesus approached and as he touched them, he said, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” When they opened their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, **“Do not tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”**

What’s the most memorable hike you’ve ever been on? Was it a hike in the Black Hills or in a national park? What did you do when you reached the summit, or when you got as far as you were going to go before you turned around? Stop to rest? Take some pictures? Or did you just take in as much as you could with your eyes and your senses, hoping somehow to capture that experience in your mind so that you could reproduce it for yourself later, when you needed some beauty or inspiration? I’m guessing you did not take away fear from the experience.

Six days after Peter’s wonderful confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God— Six days after Jesus had told his disciples that he had to suffer many things and be killed — Six days after he told them that they too, and anyone who followed him, would not be able to follow him without taking up their cross, Jesus came to Peter, James, and John, probably early in the morning, and told them, “Come with me.”

They soon realized this was going to be another one of those private events, like the raising of Jairus’s daughter. But this one was a little different. It didn’t take place in a city with all sorts of people crowding around them. They began hiking up a mountain—“a high mountain,” Matthew tells us—and the four of them were the only people in sight. Some guesses as to the mountain include Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon, but we ultimately don’t know. Jesus could have spent those five intervening days we talked about traveling with his disciples to the foot of this mountain, so the site could be anywhere within the area of the Promised Land or even outside the area of the Promised Land.

We do know that when they got to the top, Peter, James, and John were tired. Matthew doesn’t tell us that, but Luke does. Luke tells us that that the three companions knew that Jesus was going up this mountain to pray, and that’s what Jesus did when he got to the top. It’s not like his right foot stepped on the summit and immediately his body started shining. No, he began to pray, and perhaps the three apostles did too, at first, but then they probably finished and Jesus was still over there praying. They had hiked all the way up this high mountain and so they probably found somewhere comfortable to settle down and relax, and they became drowsy.

But at some point while Jesus was praying, a change took place. Matthew says that his face began shining like the sun and that his clothes became as bright as its light. Mark says they

became “dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them.” Luke says they became as “bright as a flash of lightning.” And after this transformation had taken place, Moses and Elijah, prophets who had both died many centuries earlier, also appeared in glorious splendor and began talking with Jesus about what was coming for him.

And at some point after all of this happened, Peter, James, and John came out of their drowsiness and became alert again and suddenly saw all of this, at least as much as they were able. They no doubt couldn’t look directly at Jesus’s face, but they could still see what was going on, and they could see Moses and Elijah, and they could hear the three of them talking.

Now, in Matthew’s text, Peter, James, and John were afraid when they heard the voice from the cloud that eventually appeared, pronouncing Jesus to be God’s Son. According to Luke, they became afraid as the cloud appeared and enveloped them. And according to Mark, they were freaking out when they first saw Jesus transfigured and talking with Moses and Elijah. Mark says their fear is what prompted Peter to say, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter didn’t know what else to say. In some ways, this was what they had been waiting for and hoping for—Jesus to appear in might and splendor and to overpower all his enemies with his brilliance. But now that Jesus was actually standing there in glory, with his face shining like the sun and his clothes shining like its light, he was afraid.

And when the bright cloud suddenly overshadowed them and enveloped them while he was still making that offer, he stopped speaking and was even more afraid.

And when a voice came from the bright cloud that now enveloped them and said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”, he was even more afraid and fell on his face. And the other two were just as afraid and did the same thing.

Why were they so afraid?

Peter, James, and John knew their Scripture history. Especially when the bright cloud appeared, they knew they were experiencing the Glory of the Lord. The Glory of the Lord was the name used for God’s shining appearances in the Old Testament. The Glory of the Lord often was a token of deliverance, but it was also a token of destruction. The Glory of the Lord in the pillar of cloud and fire is what had given the Israelites light through the night as they crossed the Red Sea, but it had also showed itself menacingly to the Egyptians pursuing them and it ultimately destroyed them. The Glory of the Lord is what had descended upon Mt. Sinai in cloud, thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire, and had caused the entire mountain to tremble when God gave the Israelites his law. The Glory of the Lord is what had settled in the Most Holy Place after the temple was built, which no one but the high priest could enter, and he only once a year after he sufficiently smoked the place up with incense and he had to bring the blood of sacrifices with him. The Glory of the Lord was the visible manifestation of the holy God on high.

Just about a week ago, after Peter had confessed Jesus to be the Son of God, what else had he proclaimed? Jesus had prophesied about his impending suffering and death, and Peter had said, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” And how did Jesus respond? “Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men.” And now the Glory of the Lord is enveloping him! Do you think the Glory of the Lord has any kind intentions for someone Jesus called Satan?

And the others are just as afraid—just as afraid as you or I would be if we were in the presence of Jesus shining in all of his brilliance, if we were enveloped by the bright cloud of God’s glory, if we heard a voice coming from that cloud saying that this brilliant man in front of us was his Son whom he loved and with whom he was well pleased and that we should listen to him.

We would be afraid...because we often have not listened to him. “Listen to him” has a double meaning. It means first of all the actual act of hearing what he has to say and paying attention to it and processing it internally. But it also has the connotation of obedience. If you are listening to an authority figure in the fullest sense of the word, you will also do what that authority figure says. How many times have we heard Jesus, but not paid attention to him? How many times have we paid attention to Jesus, but then disobeyed what he said? And then how many times have we disobeyed him without even knowing it, because we weren’t listening and paying attention to his Word in the first place?

What if the Glory of the Lord were to appear before us right here, right now? What if it appeared in our room at home or work at random during the week? First, what deeds would it be illuminating? And how would we feel in its presence? Yes, I would say that Peter actually was doing pretty well when he managed to spit out his offer of building three shelters. I would have expected him to be more like he was when Jesus caused him and his companions to catch so many fish that their nets began to break after they had worked hard all night without catching a thing. On that occasion, Peter said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” That’s what I would most likely say if I were in the presence of Jesus’s glory, if I were in the presence of the Glory of the Lord.

But Jesus comes to them and says, “Don’t be afraid!”

But note how he does it. You can almost imagine it on the big screen. Everything bright and glorious and fantastic, and then all of a sudden all the brightness sucks into the middle of the screen like a vacuum and just like that, it’s gone. Bright cloud—gone. Moses and Elijah—gone. Jesus’s dazzling glory—gone. Only there’s no powerful sound effect in surround sound when it happens. It just disappears, and Peter, James, and John are still bowed down, trembling, with their faces in the dirt, and Jesus, just plain old Jesus, comes over and touches them gently, and tells them, “Get up and don’t be afraid.”

And they open their eyes, and slowly look up—and it’s Jesus. Just Jesus. Just plain old ordinary Jesus. And he goes back down the mountain with them, back down to the valley, back down to the plain. Back down to humanity with their sins, with their problems and complaints and fears and doubts and diseases. Back down to his path that will lead to his betrayal, his trial, his suffering, his crucifixion, his death, his burial.

Of course the glory is still there. That’s what Jesus wanted them to see. There was an invisible reality that plain old ordinary Jesus was hiding. And he pulled back the veil a bit for them to see behind it—to see the supreme glory and majesty, to see that what appeared to be a frail fellow human being on earth was actually earth’s Sun and Shield. But this will be the last appearance of the Glory of the Lord in its old form on earth. Jesus is its fulfillment. Jesus is its culmination. And not Jesus shining out a thousand rays of light to pierce the hearts of sinful

mankind and strike them all dead. But just Jesus. Just plain old ordinary Jesus. Jesus preaching. Jesus listening. Jesus suffering. Jesus dying. The Jesus we can handle. This is God's glory.

Thank God, brothers and sisters. Thank God that Jesus doesn't appear to us here as he did on the mountain of his transfiguration. Thank God that he appears to us as just Jesus, just plain old Jesus. In simple words. In water joined to his word. In bread and wine joined to his word. Preaching the law, yes, but also touching our hearts gently and telling us, "Get up and don't be afraid." Plain old Jesus, listening to our prayers, preaching to us about how he has suffered and died for us once and for all, so that we never have to experience the glory of the Lord in his wrath.

That was the last appearance of the Glory of the Lord on earth. But it was not the last appearance of the Glory of the Lord. Thanks to plain old ordinary Jesus, we will one day see glorious Jesus as Moses and Elijah did that day, as Peter, James, and John now see him. We will see glorious Jesus face to face, as he really is, with the veil removed. We will be enveloped by the cloud and will hear the Father's words of approval and will echo them ourselves for all eternity, because plain old ordinary Jesus came to be the substitute for plain, old, ordinary, sinful you and me, and to take our sins away forever.

How good, Lord, to be here,
yet we may not remain.
But since you bid us leave the mount,
come with us to the plain.

Don't be afraid of Jesus's glory. Rejoice in it. It is your peace and your salvation. Amen.