

“Jerusalem Awaits”
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Transfiguration of the Lord
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First Scripture Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day, he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 9:28-36

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” — not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen.



Sermon: *“Jerusalem Awaits”*

This story of Jesus’ transfiguration on a mountaintop is one of those weird church stories that people either don’t understand or don’t pay much attention too. Jesus becomes shiny, God’s voice booms out, Old Testament heroes show up. Taken out of its context, it doesn’t make a lot of sense. In a world of trouble and challenges, in a world that yearns for hope, what does it matter that a couple of the disciples reported seeing Jesus’ face glow like the sun and his clothes turn dazzling white like a laundry soap commercial? To see why this story matters, you have look at what just happened and at what happens next.

In the scene just before this one, Jesus asks the gathered disciples “Who do the crowds say that I am?” “They answered, John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” Then Jesus asks the question directly to them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” Simon Peter, impetuous as always and with just enough understanding to be dangerous answered, “The Messiah of God.”¹

When Peter calls Jesus the Messiah, he uses the right word, but in the wrong way. Peter is speaking in classical terms. The Messiah was a long-expected King who was expected to be the one to restore Israel to its former glory. The Messiah would be a temporal ruler who would literally ascend the throne of David, throw off the shackles of the Roman Empire, and lead Israel back into prominence as a world political power, greater than it had been under David and Solomon, who themselves were widely considered the greatest of Israel’s Kings.

But Jesus meant something else and after asking the disciples “Who do you say that I Am,” Jesus begins to tell them and show them who he is and what it means to call him “Messiah.”

Jesus tells the disciples: “*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*”

Which does not fit into the idea of what Messiah was supposed to be. But if those words were a shock to the system, what comes next was devastating:

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Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

Jesus has now redefined not only what it means for him to be Messiah, but also what it means for *them* to follow that Messiah. And the defining nature of *both* is not privilege, but sacrifice.

I wonder what questions came charging through Peter's mind at *that* moment. What doubts were beginning to creep in? Could he have been wrong about this Jesus? Was this all just a fool's errand? The Messiah couldn't really be persecuted and killed ... could he? And am I expected to follow suit? Those fishing boats and nets he left behind a few chapters ago might have started looking pretty good right about then.

But Jesus' proclamation about what it means to be Messiah is just the beginning, for we are setting out on that slow and steady march towards Jerusalem, towards that important crossroad in our story where Jesus will not only teach and preach of the Kingdom of God, but lay down his life for it, too.

Jerusalem will be tough. The Scribes and Pharisees, the temple authorities, the Roman civil authorities, all will provide a hostile environment for Jesus and his disciples. Which shouldn't be a problem for a traditional Messiah. But what Jesus has just said gives Peter and the others reason to worry; reason to be afraid. Jesus spoke of suffering and death; both his own and potentially that of the disciples, too.

Now it's important to remember that *we* hear this story from our 21st century perspective. Like any movie about a historical event, we know how the story turns out from the very beginning. We watch *Titanic*² knowing the boat sinks. We watch *Apollo 13*³ knowing the astronauts make it home alive.

But the disciples didn't know how *this* story ends. They hadn't experienced Easter yet. They hadn't even come to terms with the fact that Good Friday was coming. The resurrection was not a historical fact for them. They were facing the fearful prospects of a hostile Jerusalem and Jesus' words that death was a part of the deal. They had reason to wonder if following Jesus had really been the right choice.

Today, in the modern church, we hear those words about laying your life down to save it and we believe that those words are figurative. Being a 21st century Christian in America has become a cushy proposition. We sit here in our comfortable pews and chairs in our nice buildings worshipping God without fear of persecution, or prosecution for that matter. As one of my favorite Presbyterians said, "We sit on our biscuits, never having to risk it."⁴

For the first followers of Jesus, it was a different world. They knew dying for what you believed was a real possibility. They just hadn't expected it to be a possibility following the Messiah.

When Jesus tells them he's going to suffer and die, they would have been shocked by those words. Messiahs don't suffer and die. And their followers certainly aren't expected to die, too. Taken literally, these words must surely have shaken the disciples.

But then, one day Jesus says, "Hey guys... come with me. I want to show you something." And they begin to walk, away from the crowds, away from the authorities, away from the realities of their world.

Standing atop that mountain, with Jesus and James and John, Peter receives all the reassurance he could ever need. Jesus' identity is confirmed. The disciples see Jesus wrapped in light, communing with the greatest figures of Israel's prophetic history, and they hear the voice of God thundering forth, calling Jesus "My Son, My Chosen".

It's a powerful moment of revelation; and Peter wants to stay. He wants to set up camp so that this moment might last a while longer. But he didn't hear the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah which Luke tells us was about Jesus' departure; the events that await him in Jerusalem. Jesus knows he cannot stay here, in this peaceful, holy place. Jerusalem awaits, and with it his true destiny and that of his disciples too.

So, Jesus declines; "Come on boys, we have to go." And they begin to head back down the mountain, back toward the crowds, the need, the work; back toward Jerusalem.

But, things are different for the disciples. Now - because of what they've seen and heard *and* felt - no matter what awaits them in Jerusalem, Peter and the other two disciples know that God is more powerful. No matter what awaits them in Jerusalem, they know that Jesus is God's chosen. They do not know yet what will happen in Jerusalem, but they know that Jesus is the Messiah for whom they have been waiting.

Author William Barclay writes that this transfiguration event would have "enabled [the disciples] to see the glory through the shame; the triumph through the humiliation; the crown beyond the cross."⁵ Like being given a small taste of dessert before having to eat your vegetables, this glimpse of Jesus' true identity would have encouraged and emboldened the disciples for what lay ahead.

What the disciples see on the mountaintop is meant to remind them of who Jesus really is, no matter what they see in the coming days and weeks that might suggest something different. And it serves to remind us too, because the events of the transfiguration at the beginning of this journey to Jerusalem differ radically from what takes place at this journey's end.

At his transfiguration, Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two great figures from Israel's past. At his crucifixion Jesus will be flanked by two criminals. Here, at the transfiguration Jesus is declared to be God's Son." But on the cross, those words will be used by the religious authorities to mock him. At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah depart leaving Jesus alone to be glorified. At the crucifixion, Jesus will die a shameful criminal's death while those gathered around will wait to see if "Elijah will come to save him." Here, at the journey's beginning, Jesus is accompanied by three disciples: Peter, James and John. But by this journey's end, those disciples will have scattered and fled.

Like Peter, we want to rest in the holy places, but we are called to follow. The beginning of Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem is inextricably connected to its end. Glory leads to suffering but on the other side, there is glory again.

Standing on the threshold of the season of Lent as we are, it becomes important for us to be reminded of who Jesus is and why we observe this season and celebrate the resurrection at its conclusion. The season of Lent is traditionally a time of preparation for Easter but, before the celebration of Easter morning, comes the darkness and tragedy of Good Friday. Though we would like to rush to the shining sunlight and gentle birdsong of the morning of resurrection, we must first wade through the painful remembrances of Jesus' betrayal, and persecution and crucifixion.

But in the transfiguration we are given a taste; a brief glimpse of what lies on the other side that will give us strength to make it through the long journey. This weird little story that is difficult to understand and easy to overlook is an assurance of who and what Jesus really is.

Jerusalem awaits. But beyond that, lies the Kingdom of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Luke 9:18-20, NRSV

² Cameron, James. *Titanic*. Performance by Leonardo DiCaprio, and Kate Winslet, Twentieth Century Fox, 1997.

³ Broyles, William, and Al Reinert. *Apollo 13*. Performance by Tom Hanks, et al., Universal Pictures, 1995.

⁴ Novak, BJ. "Safety Training." *The Office*, season 3, episode 19, NBC, 12 Apr. 2007.

⁵ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1975. 162. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.