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The Transfiguration of Our Lord – Luke 9:28-36 – Their Own Little Beatific Vision
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If you tried to describe heaven with one word or phrase, how would you do it? Most people would probably say something like, it's perfect. Joyful. Peaceful. Restful. It's the place where we'll be with our loved ones again. The place where we'll have everything we ever wanted. The place where we'll never have to deal with anything bad or sad ever again, because there won't be any sin there. And that's all true. But one of the most common ways the Bible uses to describe what heaven is like is that it's the place where we will finally get to be with God and see him as he really is. Theologians call that the *beatific* vision – the blessed, glorious vision of the true, Triune God. To see God in all his unveiled holiness and glory will mean for us that we are free from sin and we get to share in that glory for all eternity.

Theologians and hymn writers like some of the ones we sang today talk about that like something that's still off in the future – and it's true, that's something we won't get to fully experience until we get to heaven one day. But in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus gave his disciples a glimpse of his glory – he gave them their own little beatific vision up there on that mountain, and by the power of his Word working in our hearts by faith, Jesus means to give us a glimpse here today, too. And what he wants us to see in this little beatific vision isn't fear, but fulfillment; it isn't death, but life.

So as we've been saying for the last number of weeks, the season of Epiphany is the time when we remember Jesus revealing his glory as the true Son of God and Savior of all nations. We've seen some amazing things to prove that true – Jesus being worshiped by the wise men, being baptized with the full endorsement of the Father and the Holy Spirit, doing amazing miracles, preaching with divine authority... but that day as Jesus led Peter, John, and James up onto that mountain to pray, he showed them something so uniquely amazing that words could barely describe it. There Jesus was *transfigured* before them – the different Gospel writers say that his face suddenly shined with light as blinding as the sun and his clothes became so dazzling white that they were like a flash of lightning, brighter than any laundry soap in the world could ever bleach them. So what was this supposed to mean, what was going on here? Well, all throughout the Scriptures – from the first day of creation when God said, “Let there be light,” to the heavenly Jerusalem in eternity that won't need a lamp or the sun because the glory of the Lord God will be its light – light is associated with the love and truth and goodness and life that come from God himself. Here Jesus was revealing his glory as true God that he'd been hiding behind his human flesh since he came into this

world. The disciples had seen evidence of that glory up to this point, but here they saw it laid bare, plain and clear and bright as day.

And if that vision wasn't enough to behold, all of the sudden our story says, “*Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus.*” I can't imagine what those disciples must have thought about everything they were seeing right then. They were startled and dazed and afraid – and in fact, those ancient prophets Moses and Elijah were probably the perfect two people to understand that. See, both of those men during their lives got to see God's glory revealed in a special, personal way like nobody else ever did. After Moses led the Israelites' exodus out of their slavery in Egypt, they arrived at Mt. Sinai and just that quickly, Israel made a golden calf to worship instead of the true God. Well, Moses was crushed – how could the people do that after God had done so much to redeem them from their slavery and deliver them to the Promised Land? But God didn't turn his back on them or give up on Moses – instead, he strengthened Moses by proclaiming his Name and showing him his glory.

And Elijah's story was very much the same – about 600 years after Moses, the Israelites had all but totally rejected the Lord and turned to worshiping a false god named Baal. God sent Elijah to call the people back to him, and in fact proved that he was real and all-powerful when he defeated the prophets of Baal in a contest on Mt. Carmel. Well you might think that the people would turn back to the true God after such a decisive victory as that one, but actually they just threatened to kill Elijah because of it. So he ran, all the way down south to Mt. Sinai, where he told the Lord he was ready to die. He couldn't go on. So what did the Lord do? He came to Elijah in the sound of a gentle whisper to strengthen and encourage him.

Both of those men understood first-off how nerve-racking it was to see the Lord's glory, because as the Lord said to Moses, no one can see the LORD and live – no sinful person can possibly stand up before all the Lord's raw holiness and glory. They as well as anyone knew why seeing Jesus at his transfiguration would cause the disciples to fear!

But actually, what Jesus wanted to bring the disciples here wasn't fear – it was fulfillment. See, when Moses needed strength to go on leading the Israelites, the Lord appeared and gave it to him. When Elijah needed encouragement to continue preaching repentance to the Israelites, the Lord appeared and gave it to him. And when Peter, John, and James needed assurance that Jesus really was the Savior who would fulfill all of God's promises and purposes for our eternal salvation, the Lord appeared with Moses and Elijah, maybe the two most towering prophetic figures in the Old Testament, and he gave it to them. Here as the disciples listened in, they found that everything Moses and Elijah taught and worked toward

pointed straight at Jesus. It was God's plan all along that Jesus should come into this world and die for the sins of all people, and what he was about to do was the culmination of all the hopes of his people – Moses, Elijah, and everyone else – since the beginning of time. No matter how difficult things might get, no matter how much opposition they might face, no matter how hard it might be to see sometimes, the disciples were right to trust in Jesus and his Word – and friends, so are we still today. The same Jesus who fulfilled the faith of Moses and Elijah and the disciples revealed his glory on that mountain for you and me too, and what he wants you to know is that he has a plan that he's carrying out for your eternal good, he's still in control, he knows what he's doing, and he is going to win, because Jesus will never fail you!

Seeing and hearing Moses and Elijah there with Jesus, remembering their stories and how the Lord revealed his glory to them – that took away all the disciples' fears. Jesus was there fulfilling all of God's promises from the beginning of time, and he gave the disciples their own little beatific vision to prove that he really was true God in the flesh and to give them a foretaste of the heavenly glory that Jesus would one day deliver to them and to all of us who believe. And when the Father chimed in from heaven with his seal of approval on Jesus and his saving work, that just made their confidence all the more certain: "*This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.*"

The disciples had seen enough that day and throughout the rest of the time they had been following Jesus to believe that he was the Son of God. But what exactly was he *chosen* for? Not to be a powerful political figure or a popular bread king, but to be the suffering servant who would die and rise again to save us from our sins. Not to be the bringer of death, but of life.

See, that's what it means when the story says Jesus and Moses and Elijah "*spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.*" It is true that no sinner can see God's unveiled glory and live – but that's not the way Jesus wanted it to be, that's not how he wanted it to stay. Jesus didn't want his glory to be found in *punishing* sinners. He wanted it to be found in *saving* sinners. And in order to do that, about six months after this, he needed to *depart* – he needed to be crucified and killed for us, because that was the only way he could redeem us from our sins and pay the debt we owed to God. But even more so, he needed to depart from his grave three days later and depart from this world 40 days after that to prepare a place for us to live with him in heaven. See, that's the way Jesus works in our lives – when it seems like he's departed from us, he's really just preparing something so much better for us. He's promised that he will never leave us or forsake us, and whatever troubles we may experience in this world are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all when the time for our departure from this life comes, too.

Yes, Jesus revealed his glory there on the mount of Transfiguration not as the judge of our sins, but as the Savior *from* our sins – not the one whose glory *excludes* us from heaven but rather *includes* us, and what happened next gives us another little hint of that. After the disciples saw Jesus and Moses and Elijah, Peter said they wanted to stay – this was like heaven on earth to them! Who could blame them?! But then it says, "*While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.*" See, in Old Testament times when God revealed his presence in this world, he often did it in a cloud – think of the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt; think of the dark, billowing cloud on top of Mt. Sinai; think of the clouds that filled the tabernacle and the temple when they were dedicated. But the difference there was that those clouds were always meant to keep people away – it was like God shaded his holiness so it wouldn't hurt anybody. But here in our story, it seems like maybe this cloud covered Jesus and the disciples all together. Jesus didn't want to keep them away, he wanted to bring them near. He didn't want his holiness to hurt them, he wanted it to cleanse them. And if that cloud meant that God was truly present there in all his glory, then Jesus covering the disciples in that cloud must mean that he wants them and all his people to be in his presence and see his glory. But the thing is, that couldn't happen here, not for everybody, not yet – so Jesus had to depart from that mountain and go to Mt. Calvary, because there on the cross Jesus revealed his greatest glory for all to see: even though we deserve death from God because of our sins, Jesus died in our place so he could save us for life with him in heaven forever.

So as we look forward to that, let's remember how our Lord wants us to keep his glory in focus in the meantime. When the Lord revealed his glory to Moses, he *proclaimed* his Name. When the Lord revealed his glory to Elijah, he did it in a gentle *whisper*. When the Lord revealed his glory to the disciples, the Father said, "*Listen to him!*" And when Peter said, "It's good for us to be here," he wanted to put up three *shelters* – and actually the word used there is the same word used for the tabernacle in the Old Testament, the Jewish house of worship. Friends, when you want to see the glory of God, you can still see it right here, gathered for worship in Jesus' name around his saving Word and Sacraments, because here he has promised to be present with us and to show us his glory of forgiveness and eternal life. Here Jesus gives you your own little beatific vision, visible to your eyes of faith, that guarantees he is the Son of God, the Savior we all need, and the one who will bring us to the fullness of heavenly glory with him one day. So as we prepare for Lent and as we prepare for life, let's keep our eyes always fixed on Jesus, because his Transfiguration teaches us that he is the one who takes away our fears and fulfills all our hopes; he is the one who died our death and rose again to win us eternal life where we will see his glory face-to-face forevermore. Amen.