

Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in the time after Epiphany, right before Lent. The 2nd Letter of Peter is interesting because in it Peter mentions this mountaintop experience that we call, “The Transfiguration.” He writes of being, “eyewitness to his majesty,” of how he heard the heavenly voice that said, “This is my son, whom I love, with whom I am well-pleased.”

In Matthew’s Gospel the event is also described. Though the details are a little different, it is in the main the same story. A short time after Peter had confessed the Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah, Jesus took Peter and James and John up on a mountain privately and was changed before them. His ordinary countenance was replaced by a majestic appearance; his face shone like the sun, his clothing became white as light, and Moses and Elijah appeared there talking with him.

This appearance came on the heels of Peter’s confession, which is a turning point in the career of Jesus. Afterwards, Jesus began to teach his disciples the troubling message about his upcoming suffering and death, and one gets the impression that for these three disciples, the experience of Transfiguration was meant to lift their spirits in the face of such

discouraging news, to replace despair and confusion with encouragement.

2nd Peter

What makes 2nd Peter interesting is that Peter gives an explanation of what this experience came to mean to him. He mentions the promise of participation in the divine nature, and escaping the corruption of the world caused by evil desires (mainly greed, as it turns out later in the letter). Then he says,

“Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness knowledge; and to knowledge self-control; and to self-control perseverance; and to perseverance godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness, which is friendship, and to brotherly kindness love.”

He goes on to say that these qualities will keep our knowledge of the Lord from becoming ineffective if we possess them in increasing measure. Then he relates his experience on the mountain as evidence for these things.

Experience and Doctrine

There are two poles in the religious life that must be balanced if we are to be healthy, if we are to avoid the extremes of emotional excess on the one hand and

cold intellectual rigidity on the other. These two poles are religious experience and religious doctrine.

When we speak of doctrine we mean the ideas that give us a framework for understanding our lives. In terms of Christianity some of the doctrines that developed are: Creation, Original Sin, Atonement, the Trinity and the Incarnation, the Forgiveness of Sin and the Resurrection of the Dead, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Rule of Love, the Return of Christ. To these others can be added like the Priesthood of All Believers, the Autonomy of the Local Church, and Religious Liberty, and even more. Providence.

When we speak of experience we acknowledge that we each have stories to tell, and there are as many stories as there are people. Not all our stories are as dramatic as those of Peter, James, and John, but we all have them, and they breathe life into the doctrines of the faith, giving shape and texture.

I myself have told a silly basketball story about a pink brick. And in preparation for this message I looked at the sermon from Transfiguration Sunday last year and found that I told of a dream I once had about death and resurrection. Both of these are just a part of my story. Who knows what your story may be?

Experience without the guidance of doctrine is like the Amazon, going wherever it wants to go, failing to provide an interpretation of life that can lead to health. Doctrine without experience is just words and is dry and boring and can cause divisions and lead to a lack of compassion and love.

Historical Movements

Very often, in Christian history, when there is a movement that is doctrinaire, it will often be followed by a backlash, a movement characterized by a focus on experience. The Baptists and Methodists can be seen in this light. Both have their ideas of how experience and doctrine should play out, but for the Baptists, doctrine is given the weightier emphasis while the Methodists are more experiential. Either way, there must be balance.

Along the way there is room to breathe. We should not expect ourselves to have a perfect understanding or always be able to relate experience to doctrine, nor will we have a perfect love. The reason the passage from 2nd Peter is important is because it tells us that for Peter, his experience of Jesus, both the part on the mountain and also the larger experience of discipleship, denial, and restoration, led him to a belief that the right interpretation of our religious experience

should lead us to a *more* perfect love. If it does, then we know that we are on the right path.

Key

The key is to see life as it really is, in all its wonder, like the three disciples on the mountain saw Jesus;

The tree is not just a tree, it is shade and fruit, and anything that can be made from its wood;
The job is not just a job, it is a livelihood;
The school is not just a school, it is an education;
The cornfield is food for the world;
The road is not just a slab of concrete or asphalt, it is a journey to a destination.

And people, the people we know, the ones we love, work with and live with, even the ones we don't know and don't get along with so well, they are not just people, but friends and family.

All this means nourishment and health. It means that not only are the needs of our bodies met, but also our human need for relationship which is much more than any of the things themselves in isolation.

And Jesus is not just the founder of a religious movement that has wonderful ideas:

He is the Resurrection of the Dead;
He is the Forgiveness of Sin;
He is the Power of Divine Love.

It is important enough to see Jesus as a human being, but every now and then, it is given to us to catch a glimpse of Jesus in all his majesty.

That glimpse is the Transfiguration. See it, open your mind to it, open your heart to the implications of it and be encouraged by it like Peter and the others did.

“Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness knowledge; and to knowledge self-control; and to self-control perseverance; and to perseverance godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness which is friendship, and to friendship unselfish love,” the sacrificial kind of love God has loved us with.

In the meantime, suffering is coming, and death, but they are not the last word, but only the words spoken first before the gospel words of life come in all their splendor.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)