

Matthew 17:1-9      Eyewitness to Majesty  
February 23, 2020

The term, “majesty,” is defined as, “impressive stateliness, dignity, or beauty.” The Rocky Mountains are majestic, as are the Pacific Ocean, the Grand Canyon, and interstellar space, especially seen through a telescope or on a moonless night far away from the city.

In addition to the natural world, human beings often want to claim majesty for their own creations; a capital ship like the Symphony of the Seas, the Hoover Dam, the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, or any one among dozens of cities, theme parks, factories, or stadiums.

Sometimes people even go so far as to claim a majesty for themselves, or someone around them. I used to hear the phrase bantered about, that someone was, “bigger than life,” perhaps a preacher or a general or a politician or a beautiful actress or a world class athlete. Nowadays, we know too much about our icons to see them with such naive admiration, and yet, we still sometimes speak of people as, “having presence, which is, perhaps, a milder form of admiration, recognizing a lesser majesty.

One wonders about the meaning of all this? In the bible, Moses is presented as having a glorious glow about him after he had spent time on the holy mountain in God’s presence, when he was receiving the commandments. And here on this Sunday we

mark the day when Jesus was changed before three of his disciples, metamorphosed, changed from his ordinary appearance to something more impressive, something more dignified than usual, more beautiful. We call it the Transfiguration.

### Ordinary Experience

Most of the time we do not think of ourselves and our experiences as majestic. Life is spent living out ordinary experiences among down-to-earth people. We live, shop, work, play, and worship among those who seem to be about the same size as life at best, and often smaller, not transfigured at all.

Sometimes we dress up to make things *seem* bigger and more important. We often do this at weddings and maybe graduations, or when there is going to be an award ceremony of some kind, when we acknowledge and celebrate someone for an extra-ordinary accomplishment.

For most of us, however, the days are gone when we dress up for worship. In the past one might suppose that people wanted to have a little majesty in their lives, just once a week or so. But we do have leftover pipe-organs and stained glass windows and vaulted ceilings that speak to a by-gone era when people wanted to worship in a place of grandeur.

There is a trend against majestic places of worship, rooms are dressed down nowadays. Part of the reason is simply practical necessity and cost, and

because there was some overkill on the dressing up of things. People felt too out of sync, life was more casual and people opted for more casual forms of worship. The one thing about ordinary life is that it is easier for ordinary people to feel at home in it.

And who could blame people for moving away from cathedrals, and stuffy suits and ties, and fancy dresses every Sunday? “Dress up” church was showy and those who could not afford it often felt out-of-place instead of at home when they came to church. Yet there is also a feeling of something lost when things are dressed down. The splendor is lost.

## Majesty

There are two kinds of majesty that I would like to talk about and suggest we give some attention to. The first is what I will call “life” majesty. That is, what we experience as *ordinary* has a kind of *splendor* to it that is really quite remarkable. *Life is majestic*, every breath we take of it. People, the people around us, have an amazingly extraordinary quality about them just because they are alive.

Part of our loss when we take everything as ordinary and dress it down to make it more comfortable is that we fail to see everyday life as the amazingly grand miracle that it is. We fail to notice the remarkable in every moment we live out under God’s grace, to take in the miracle of our own creativity.

The second is divine majesty, the beauty of the incarnated divinity that we long to see but to which we suffer blindness. This kind of majesty is what happened to Peter and James and John on the high and lifted up Mount of Transfiguration. They saw Jesus as he really was, not merely Son of Man, as he preferred to be called, but also Son of God, conversing with Moses and Elijah, the great lawgiver and prophet.

I believe we all long for such experiences, and in one way or another have them before we are finished with this life. If we are up to it, we might even notice when they happen. When we do notice, no matter how peculiar our transfigured moments may be, we can live for awhile on them. We do not need them everyday, maybe not even every once in a while. Once in a lifetime is enough from some, as long as we are graced enough to believe that they are from God, that like Peter said in 2 Peter when he wrote,

“We did not follow clearly invented stories when we told you about the power and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, *but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty*. For he received honor and glory from God when the voice came to him from the majestic glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well-pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

## Eyewitnesses to Majesty

And we too have beheld God's glory, are eyewitnesses to majesty. I don't know your stories and you only know hints of mine, but God is in them, and there are remarkable experiences enough to go around to see life transfigured, more stately, dignified and beautiful than it usually seems like it is.

These times of Transfiguration change *us* too. They make us a little more like we are meant to be. They cause the litany of goodness to come a little bit more alive in us; love, compassion, kindness, courage, peace, hope, I am sure you know all the words. And they lower the anxiety level and drive out fear.

Look at the crisis in the world;

Political division, both sides fear that if the other side wins it will be the end of America as we know it (don't believe it), the threat of environmental catastrophe, economic collapse, a pandemic that will not just threaten but actually bring about the tragic death of half of the world's population, or more.

Or, on the personal side; the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, trouble in the lives of the young people we care about, cancer and other diseases, loneliness. The Transfigured experiences like that of Peter, James, and John, and ourselves, eyewitnesses to majesty, make those threats smaller, and assigns them the smaller than life place they deserve, and carry us

through the hard times like these followers of Jesus were sustained in the time of the Passion.

Finally, the most transfigured moment of them all, when Jesus was lifted up not on the mountain of the Transfiguration but on the hill of the Passion, and it was there for all to see, God's true nature, lived and dying out in its full glory. And the Rocky Mountains and the Grand Canyon and the Pacific Ocean, and even Space itself seem small by comparison.

And we are lifted up on the wings of Grace.

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