

“Shine”  
Transfiguration Sunday  
February 26, 2017  
Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.*

*And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

*Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.*

*Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

*While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"*

*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.*

*But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."*

*And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*

### Introduction

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. And today we shift from one season to another. On the Liturgical calendar of the Christian year, today marks the end of the time after the Epiphany, which was in early January, while moving us to the next, which is Lent, which begins this week with Ash Wednesday. This shift is marked by a unique, supernatural event that is told not only in The Gospel of Matthew, but also in Mark and Luke, and then remembered once more in the New Testament in the second letter of Peter. It's a story about a sudden change—a metamorphosis. There are bright lights and the blinding glory of God. In today's message there is revelation and then preparation. Preparation for Lent, and preparation for Passion of Jesus Christ.

Over the last few weeks we have been up on the mountain listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Today we climb a different mountain and hear another voice and see a different sight. The setting is somewhere in northern Israel. Most recently in Matthew's gospel Jesus and the disciples have been in Caesarea Philippi, the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Peter's confession of Christ happens at

Caesarea Philippi. When asked by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God.”

### The Great God of the Mountain

And then,

*Six days later, Matthew writes, Jesus takes with him Peter and James and his brother John and leads them up a high mountain, by themselves.*

Peter, James and John. Close friends—these were the ones Jesus called first out of the fishing boats to follow him. They have walked many miles with Jesus. Today they are going up another mountain. Good physical activity. Mountains are good for the body and good for the soul. No wonder Jesus climbed them regularly. The greatness of God can be experienced on a mountain. You can hear the wind gently whispering through the pines at the lower elevations. Then as you go higher, you hear the sounds of streams rushing down over rocks. As you climb, the trees are shorter and the vegetation more sparse. As you get near the top the temperature swings are dramatic, and the wind now whistles through what is mostly rocks. A good climb will exhaust you, but reaching the top is always exhilarating.

### The Great God of Light

But then, something out of the ordinary happens. Something supernatural. They follow him up the mountain, because, well, they follow him wherever he goes. And now, a bright, shining light is emanating from the face of Jesus.

*And he transfigures before them, and his face is shining like the sun, and his clothes are dazzling white.*

*Suddenly there appears Moses and Elijah, talking with him.*

*Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

What a fantastic vision for them to see Moses and Elijah! The representatives of The Law and the Prophets. For centuries God’s people have known the story Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, and how he himself received a glowing presence from being with the Glory of Lord up on Mt. Sinai, as we heard Gail read this morning from the Book of Exodus. Elijah was also known for a memorable event on Mt. Carmel when as the only remaining prophet of God, at one point, he faced off against the 450 prophets of Baal. The Great God of Israel prevailed that day when fire was sent down on the mountain.

And so, a thought enters Peter’s mind. The Feast of the Tabernacles. Sukkoth. The building of tents. It’s a festival for remembering the Israelites staying in temporary shelters as they travelled through the wilderness for forty years after leaving Egypt. Peter’s energy is pumped up and he expresses his desire to build three tents for Moses Jesus and Elijah.

### The Great God Speaks

But then, as Peter is going on, there is the Voice. Have you ever heard the voice of the One who precedes all voices? The light is bright, but now there is an even

brighter light coming from a cloud. Clouds come and go quickly at the top of the mountain. This one descends and surrounds them,

*and suddenly from the cloud a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"*

We know those words, we have heard them before. God spoke them at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. But today on this mountain when this cloud rolls in, and

*When the disciples hear the voice, they fall to the ground and are overcome by fear.*

It's been said, "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." It can be a dreadful moment when you discover that God is real. When the lightening dances all around you, and the thunder claps on top of you, and you wonder if this moment is your last. That's when you have a clear sense that God is not messing around. This is the time to lay flat on the ground and pray for your very life.

### The Great Hand of God

Too much. God is too awesome. Too great to even come before, let alone look upon. Peter knew something when he said just six days earlier that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He believed it somehow, and yet now, he could see it with his own eyes, and hear it with his own ears, if only he could stand the sight and bear the sound. But down on the ground he goes with the others. It's too much.

*But then, Jesus comes over to them and touches them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."*

He touches them. We know that touch. It's the hand of the parent that reaches out when, as a child, we have fallen down. It's the great hand of God that touches each morning and brings the sun back into the sky. It's that same healing hand that touches our broken relationships to restore them to health. It's the same hand that is now grabbing what were dead branches through the winter and is calling forth fresh buds. And here is the good news: that when you reach your last day in this life, and your final breaths grow short, and then you slip away to death, it's that same hand, which is laid upon you as Jesus says, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

*And when Peter and the others looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*

What do they see? They see the Reconciler; the Peacemaker; the one who reunites humanity with God. The one who reconnects Creation with Creator. The One who is both God and Human. It's the mysterious dual nature of Jesus the Christ. Fully God and fully human. It's beyond our capacity to understand. And so, we hold that mystery, allowing it to do its work on us, knowing that the Great hand of God lifts us up to resurrection because it happened first with Jesus, the human being who shines with the Glory of God.

### Prepare for Lent

They don't stay at the mountaintop long. They come back down the mountain in a kind of denouement to the story. The great moment has passed. It's time to return to the

valley. Time to get back to the everyday life. Now it is time to move back into Jesus's final journey to Jerusalem. It is time to prepare. It's time to shine

*As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*

Mysteriously, some things about Jesus he asks to keep secret, even if just a little while. Some things cannot be immediately explained, either by Jesus to us, or by us to others. It seems Jesus is saying to the disciples, "Keep this special mountain moment inside and be comforted and reassured as things will get worse when we get to Jerusalem, and things will quickly fall apart, and a welcoming crowd will quickly turn and demand a crucifixion."

We too can hold this thought of the shining glorious Jesus inside us as we go through Lent; beginning on the somber and reflective Ash Wednesday, and making our way through the forty days, and then into Holy Week; Maundy Thursday and then Good Friday, and eventually to Easter morning when the world is reborn through the resurrection of Jesus. Through our Lenten journey we can glorify the Lord. It's time to prepare. It's time to shine. Amen.