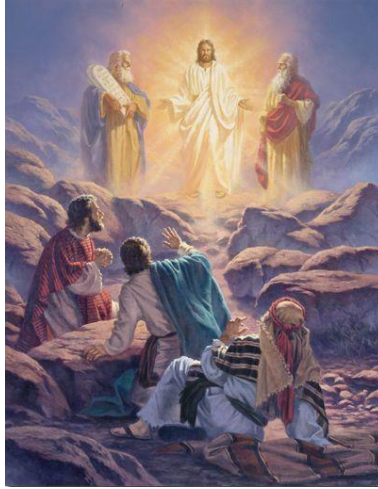


Sermon – February 19, 2023
“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit come. Visit, fill our open hearts and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people, allowing our continued transformation into Christ's image, and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

I seem to spend more time these days writing to the churches than I spend with the people of the churches, speaking to them and sharing what Jesus said, did, and how we have come to understand more fully what Jesus taught us over the years that we walked with him. Sometimes it is a struggle to write down what we experienced. Let me see how this sounds.

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”²¹

I wonder if these words convey effectively to those who are just learning about our Lord what happened that day on the mountain. How do you write words to describe something you have experienced yet have no words to describe? The memory of that time on the mountain is such a powerful, clear memory and, with the power of Holy Spirit, it comes fully to my mind even after all these years. I can still remember Jesus coming to us early that morning and asking us to go with him up the mountain. Jesus went away to pray often, usually alone, but that day he woke up three of us, James, John, and me, and asked us to go along. We were tired from our journeys over the last days, but we were each excited to be asked to go along with Jesus wherever he might be going. We had no idea where we might be going with Jesus, but we did what we did most mornings, we got up and followed Jesus. That morning Jesus led the way up the mountain. I was never much of a mountain climbing person and as we started, I worked hard to keep up with them, and as we went higher and higher up the mountain, I had to work even harder. It did seem like a long way to go to pray. I remember passing many prime places on the mountain that looked to me as if they would have provided privacy for Jesus to pray, but Jesus seemed to know the way to where he was going that morning. As we climbed, the light of a new day was beginning to grow around us and the clear skies were beginning to turn blue and reflect in the sea behind us. Most of the trip up the mountain was done in silence. There wasn't any teaching shared by Jesus that morning as we climbed and that was a good thing as I probably could not have talked well anyway. I don't climb mountains often and have had too many years standing on a boat. I can easily keep my balance as the boat moves with the waves, but climbing up a mountain was a real physical challenge.

Since there was not a lot of talking, I had time to think about what Jesus had been teaching us over the last few days. One of the thoughts I recall that was on my mind that morning was Jesus' recent comment he had shared with us just days before. He had told us that some who were "standing with him will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."ⁱⁱ I did not understand what Jesus might have been talking about when he spoke those words and wondered what he might have meant. I recall wondering if he meant his kingdom would come soon and what the arrival of his kingdom would hold for me and the others who had decided to follow him.

The climbing was hard work, but the morning was fresh and cool with a slight breeze coming to us from over the sea that helped keep us cool. The path was steep and the ground was

rocky and rough, but Jesus led us by a path that allowed us to make steady upward progress. Most of what I could hear as we climbed was myself breathing hard as I worked to keep up with the others and the sound of stones being moved as we broke them free with our feet as we walked. And then we found ourselves alone with Jesus at the height of the mountain in a broad level place, and Jesus stopped just a bit in front of us and turned around facing us. I thought he was going to give us teaching on prayer or tell us what to do as he prayed, but in that instant, Jesus changed before our eyes. There was no sound, no cry from Jesus. He was instantly transformed from the Jesus we followed every day into something new, something I had never seen before or since. I don't really have words to describe what I saw, what we all saw. Jesus was transfigured from what we had always known to something new that we did not know or had even heard described. The best description I can give is that light began to flow from Jesus and the light kept getting brighter and brighter. His face became bright like the sun, yet we could look on his face and recognize him. His clothes became dazzling white like the light that comes with a flash of lightning, dazzling, but not blinding. In all this light, his clothes appeared whiter than anything I had ever seen. Yet, even though he was changed, I was not afraid. Instead, I was filled with awe at what I was seeing and not filled with a desire to run away or turn my eyes from him. I did not understand what was happening to Jesus and yet I was drawn to stay close to him.

And while all of these transfigurations in Jesus' appearance were happening, there were suddenly two men with him, and somehow, I knew they were Moses and Elijah. They didn't have names on their clothes or identifying symbols, but I knew I was looking at Moses and Elijah. Their appearance was also not frightening to us, and we could see they were talking to Jesus. I thought how wonderful to have Moses and Elijah and Jesus all together in this place on the mountain. Their presence was a great event and I needed to do something besides stand there and gaze on them. The first action that came to my mind was to offer to build a permanent structure for each of them to stay in. I spoke up immediately, asking Jesus if I should build three houses so that each of them might have a place to dwell with us on the mountain. Somehow, standing before us was Moses, the one through whom God gave Israel the Law, and on the other side of Jesus stood Elijah, the greatest prophet sent to bring God's word to Israel. Jesus did not answer my question. Instead, almost as soon as I had spoken, a cloud overshadowed us, not a dark rain cloud or thunderstorm cloud, but a cloud that was bright and shining, yet it cast a shadow around us.

At this point we heard the first sounds we had heard other than my voice since we stopped our climb at this broad place in the mountain. A voice came from the cloud, loud, clear, and firm. The voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”ⁱⁱⁱ These words were not distant sounds that one hears dimly in their ears, but were words that pierced into our hearts and became commands to us so that we desired to obey with all of our heart, soul, and strength. When we heard the voice and words, we were terrified and fell face down on the ground, overcome by fear, frozen in fear there on the mountain.

The next thing any of us can recall is that Jesus touched us and told us to “Get up and do not be afraid.” With the sound of his voice and his touch, my fear eased and went away. I could move again, and I looked up and everything was as it had been when we arrived. The sun was rising, the sky was clear, the mountain was around us, and down in the valley behind us was the sea. After hearing those words and being touched by Jesus, our fear was gone and we regained strength and were able to get up and stand on our feet. When we looked around, we found we were alone again on the mountain with Jesus. And even though we had so many questions, such as “What just happened? What did we see when you were shining bright? Whose voice spoke to us? Whose son are you?” yet none of us knew what to say to Jesus or what questions to ask. We each wanted to obey the voice, to be with Jesus and to listen to him.

Jesus walked by us and headed back down the mountain, and we followed him back down the mountain to the others who were waiting below. As we walked, he spoke and told us, no, he ordered us, not to tell anyone what we had seen in this vision on the mountain until after the Son of Man is raised from the dead. He said those strange words again, that he would be raised from the dead. We didn’t know what to say. We didn’t understand what had happened on the mountain, and we wondered who would believe us if we told them what we had witnessed. All of the questions we had would not be answered until later, until after Jesus’ death on the cross, the empty tomb, his resurrection, his ascension to heaven, and the outpouring of Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Only then did we begin to understand what we had witnessed that morning on the mountain.

When John wrote about his experience on the mountain that day, he used the word “transfigured” to describe the glimpse of Jesus’ divine glory we witnessed. I have come to understand that Jesus was, is, and always will be more than the teacher we walked with and climbed the mountain with. He is divine. He is the son of God who was and is and will always be

with us. The transfigured Jesus we witnessed gave us a glimpse of the glory that Jesus, the son of God, had in God's presence and it left us hungry to see Jesus in his glory again and to be with him always, a hunger that will be satisfied when Jesus returns in power.

When I think back to my request to Jesus to build three booths and my assumption that day that the three who stood before us were equals, I realize that my assumption was so wrong. No wonder Jesus never answered my question. Jesus has no equal. Jesus alone is the son of God. We witnessed that day what Jesus was before, when he was with God. In time we began to realize Jesus was God in the flesh, another mystery about Jesus that is hard to understand. I don't remember when we started talking about the trip up the mountain and sharing what we witnessed with the other disciples and those who followed Jesus. I do understand that as Holy Spirit led us into all truth, we began to understand what we had witnessed that day on the mountain. We remembered Jesus' words, the ones I had pondered on the climb that day, and we understood that we three were those who saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom in the glory he had and has, which we will all witness when he returns in power. We had been given a glimpse of Jesus' majesty, a glimpse that did not bring fear to our hearts but filled our hearts with joy and a desire to not only see a glimpse of Jesus' majesty but to be with him where his divine nature is a glorious presence for those who follow him to behold. We had seen Jesus standing with the greatest of God's servants, Moses and Elijah, and yet Jesus alone shone with bright light. Jesus was and is greater than these great servants of God. Jesus is God's son. That Jesus is God's son is what the Majestic Glory confirmed for us with the voice we heard. In time we began to share this vision with not only the other disciples but with all those who came seeking to be followers of Jesus, and it helped them to understand that Jesus was not just a great teacher but was God in the flesh, God's son. Jesus will come again in the glory we witnessed, a glory that will not cause us fear but will welcome those who follow him into the kingdom of God.

Let me see, where was I with this letter? Oh yes, I was trying out words to describe what we experienced on the mountain. Let's see, I was writing, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully

confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”^{iv} Yes, yes, I think those words will work.

Pray with me: Jesus, we too long to see your glory. Guide us up the mountain of sanctification that we also might come to a broad place where you are transformed before us and we behold your glory. Jesus, shine your lamp into the darkness of our lives and guide us until the morning star rises in our hearts. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ NRSV 2 Peter 1: 16-19

ⁱⁱ NRSV Matthew 17:???

ⁱⁱⁱ NRSV Matthew 17:5

^{iv} NRSV 2 Peter 1:16-19