

Seeing Under The Surface

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Transfiguration Sunday
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Matthew 17:1-9 Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; ² and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. ³ And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. ⁴ Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" ⁶ And when the disciples heard *it*, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." ⁸ When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. ⁹ Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

How many of you share Peter's attitude? How many of us come to church with that attitude? The psalmist says, "I was glad when they said to me let us go up to the house of the Lord." We started out singing Peter's words this morning. "Tis good Lord to be here." How many were thinking about what they were singing? How many of you were excited to come to church today and how many of you came because you feel you have to?

We might be tempted to think that things would be different if we would get to see Jesus transfigured. If Moses and Elijah were here this morning. If we heard the voice from heaven. If all that happened whenever we came to church we would be a lot more excited.

Actually the truth is if it all that happened every time you came to church you would be a lot more excited the first time, after that it would start to get old pretty fast.

But there is a bigger issue. The bigger problem is how seldom we take the time to look under the surface. Because we fail so often to look under the surface we often fail to appreciate what is truly important.

Close to twenty years ago I was at a nice sandy beach. I walked into the water until it got up to my thighs. At that point I dove in. What I didn't see was this one large rock sticking up out of the sand, right where I decided to dive in.

How I missed that rock I don't know but if I had taken the time to look more carefully at what was under the surface I wouldn't have ended up in the hospital with nine stitches.

We have a problem with only seeing what is on the surface. We do it with one another, and it causes a lot of problems in our relationships. We often take our spouses for granted because we are only looking at the surface. We only look at the surface of church and God's word and we take that for granted as well.

In our text Peter James and John received a rare opportunity to see under the surface.

Paul reminds us that in Christ "the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily." And John reminds us that "we beheld his glory the glory as of the only begotten of the father full of grace and truth."

In the person of Christ was hidden the shekinah, that is the glory of the Lord. This is the glory of the Lord that came down upon Mount Sinai and caused Moses' face to shine when he returned to the Israelites. This is the same glory, although in a toned down form, that went before the Children of Israel as a pillar of fire and a cloud. This is the same glory that filled the temple when it was dedicated by Solomon. The same glory that Isaiah saw in a vision when he saw the Lord high and sitting on a throne.

This same glory was in there in the man Jesus Christ but hidden under the surface where it could not normally be seen.

So far the apostles had received opportunities to view little cracks of that glory, both in the miracles and in the teachings of Jesus. But there is much in our text that reveals even they did not understand the fullness of what was really there. Even they had to some extent only seen the surface. Their eyes like ours were closed to the truth of what was underneath.

In the same way we have seen small suggestions throughout Epiphany of this fullness of glory. But we often fail to truly appreciate what is actually there. Like looking at an iceberg, we see only a small part sticking up above the water and fail to appreciate how much is hidden from our view.

Peter's response to Jesus reveals that he made the same mistake that Jacob made. Remember how God came to Jacob in a dream?

In that dream He promised Jacob, "I will be with you."

Jacob wakes from the dream and builds an altar, saying "surely God is in this place, and I did not know it."

Instead of marveling in the truth that the Son of God was with him wherever he went, he thought there was something special about that place.

Peter also tries to make the mountain top into something special instead of recognizing the truth that this same shikénah, this same glory of God was present in the person of Jesus wherever Jesus went. There was no need for a tent to commemorate the place. What Peter saw there was always with him in the person of Jesus Christ.

People never learn. Many people are still trying to figure out which mountain it was so they can build a little chapel or church there. There are probably a couple of them on multiple mountains today, all claiming to be the spot where Jesus was transfigured.

The Father's response is one well worth hearing and pondering. "This is my son . . . hear him."

Rather than building a tent on the mountaintop carry His words with you in your heart. Build a home for Jesus in your heart and the same glory that appeared to Peter James and John will be with you wherever you go.

Peter, James and John were filled with fear and the trembling. In the gospel of Matthew this fear is mentioned only when the cloud comes, and the voice speaks. In the Gospel of Mark we are told that they were filled with fear already when they saw Moses and Elijah and Jesus shining in glory.

Why were they afraid of Jesus? This is the same man they had walked and talked to for over a year. Why were they afraid of Jesus now and not at other times?

Well, they partly were, when Peter and Andrew had the miraculous catch of fish, Peter also fell down and said to Jesus "Depart from me for I am a sinner." When they saw Jesus walk on water and calm the storm they were filled with awe and wonder and fear.

Whenever they had those glimpses of His glory they were filled with fear and wonder. But in-between they "took Jesus for granted." You can see this taking Jesus for granted in the account of the disciples arguing over who is the greatest. Would they have dared to do this if they had remembered his power and his majesty?

Or when Peter attempted to tell Jesus he was wrong. "**Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!**" **Matthew 16:22**

At times like these it is clear the apostles forgot the glory that was under the surface.

In part this is by God's design. He hid the fullness of His glory in the man Jesus Christ so that he could walk among us as one of us. So that the apostles could walk with and talk with him and learn from him without being filled with fear. But at the same time, it is incumbent upon us not to forget what is just under the surface.

In this same way He has hidden His glory and power in His word and in His sacraments. So that when we come to church and when we receive the Lord's supper or baptism that same glory that was revealed on the mountain is here and there. It is hidden so that we do not have to come in fear, but it is there so that we too can partake in His glory.

Transfiguration Sunday is here to remind us what we receive every Sunday. Every time we come to God in His word. Every time we receive His sacraments.

"The glory as of the only begotten of the Father."

Don't forget the glory that is just under the surface.

Ever since that day when I dove into a rock I have been extra careful to check the water before diving underneath. Peter certainly never forgot what he saw on that mountain, writing over 30 years later Peter reminds us:

2 Peter 1:18 And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

Just because you can't always see it, don't forget what is truly present just under the surface every time you come to church and every time you approach God's word. Amen