

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

“Listen to Him”

Today we celebrate a most extraordinary event - the Transfiguration. We celebrate the remarkable transformation that once took place in the appearance of Jesus. Three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all mention the Transfiguration in detail. The question is always asked, “Why did the event take place?” It is a good question too.

In order to understand all of that – we need to understand what was going on. Before today's Gospel event took place a question had been raised to the apostles – and one that they asked themselves too about just who they thought that Jesus is. It comes up three times.

- Jesus has just walked on the water and calmed the raging storm. And in Luke 8:25 the disciples ask the question: *“Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.”*
- In Luke 9:7-9 Jesus and His disciples had been out among the people performing marvelous miracles – driving out demons and curing the sick and all of this comes to the attention of the local ruler Herod the Tetrarch. St. Luke records Herod saying: *“I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?”* This ruler killed John the Baptist but doesn't know who this is. Believe me, he will find out before long!
- And then in Matthew 16:15 and Luke 9:18-20, Jesus is at Caesarea Philippi, alone with His disciples at prayer and He asks them this question: *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”* They replied, *“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.”* *“But what about you?”* he asked. *“Who do you say I am?”* Peter answered, *“The Christ, the Son of the living God.”*

As today's Gospel message tells us, just six days later – Jesus would take His inner circle – Peter, James and John to a high mountain. Some say this is Mount Tabor and others say Mount Hermon – and either one is an awesomely high mountain that at this time of year is snow peaked. It does snow in Israel. I have pictures of snow in Jerusalem, which is on a mountain. I happen to agree with the school of thought that it was Mount Hermon – which can be seen right from the site of Caesarea Philippi. It makes sense that they would go there with them. On the top of the that mountain Jesus was transfigured; the Greek word is μεταμορφόω (*metamorphoe*) from which we get the word metamorphosis. With this transfiguration – Jesus' face shone so bright, which was very similar to the way that Moses' face shone after he had been in the presence of Almighty God and Moses had to wear a veil because it upset the people because his face was so bright. The white garments suggested a pure heavenly being.

Jesus was there on that mountain with Moses and Elijah. I believe that Elijah symbolized the prophets, those who speak on God's behalf. He was expected to come before the Christ, the Messiah, to prepare the way for Him. Moses represented the Law – since he was the deliverer of God's Law and also the deliverer of God's people. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and He even told people that. He did everything and more than what was required by the Old Testament Law. He acted as the ultimate prophet or spokesperson of God. Jesus did not make the Old Testament as something irrelevant, but He fulfills its promises. He brings in

the New Testament as a new way to God and He also brings in an era when God's law is written on people's hearts as prophesied by Jeremiah over six hundred years before Jesus was born, in Jeremiah 31:31-33 – God said *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."* The written law was very useful, and God-given – but something more was needed. God would have to change His people from the inside out, a transformation, putting His law into their hearts through His Holy Spirit.

On that mountain, that day, a new era was on the horizon. The Old Covenant, represented by Moses and Elijah was going to pass away and the new Covenant was coming, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This new covenant of the relationship with Jesus – and the partaking in that New Covenant through His Body and Blood is the most precious gift that we, believers of who Jesus is, have been given, and will receive in just minutes from now.

And then, something amazing happened, *"a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"* (Matthew 17:5) The cloud makes a statement of its own, suggesting the glory and presence of God. In the Old Testament, God led the Israelites out of Egypt by a cloud. Then there was the proclamation spoken by God like that at Jesus' baptism. Like the transforming experiences of Moses and Elijah on a mountain, Jesus receives heavenly confirmation of His special role in God's purpose for His people. That day on that mountain, Jesus is revealed to Peter, James and John, without a doubt, as the Son of God. We are given the opportunity to more fully understand the close, loving relationship that Jesus has with God the Father. The words, *'listen to Him'* back up the words of Jesus about His coming crucifixion. The words of God also show that Jesus is superior to all who have gone before Him, even 'greats' of the Jewish faith like Moses and Elijah.

One of those who were present that day at this amazing experience had something to say about it. Peter wrote that what he witnessed was true. *"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."* (2 Peter 1:16-19) He said that it happened and we should listen to Him. He put it all together for us – that what he witnessed that day, and what he witnessed after the Resurrection and ascension of Jesus were true, eyewitness accounts.

Seeing what they saw, and hearing what they saw that day on that mountain must have been so amazing. They probably felt that they wanted to share this with the world, but Jesus had other thoughts. As they fell to their faces – Jesus told them to fear not. *“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”* (Matthew 17:9) Of course they obeyed Jesus, but had questions. *“The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.”* Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” (Matthew 17:10-13) Remember, John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah? God’s plan was being laid out right before them.

I can’t help but think of Herod the Tetrarch’s words inquiring of who Jesus is: *“I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?”* Which then took me to his meeting Jesus after He was arrested and sent to him by the High Priest. *“When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.”* (Luke 23:8-9) Jesus did not need to answer any of this non-believers questions, for in just days the world would know that the Son of God had risen from the dead and would fulfill the long ago promises of the Messiah from the Scriptures. God the Father said it all when He told the three apostles, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”* (Matthew 17:5) We would do well to follow those instructions.