

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

“Witnesses”

We have been witnesses to some unforgettable things in our lives – some good and some not so good. If I were to go around the room we might hear some incredible things like being there for the birth of a grandson or granddaughter, seeing a celebrity in person – up close and personal, getting a hole in one on a very difficult course, maybe it was flying on the supersonic Concorde, going on the trip of a lifetime, or experiencing God doing something miraculous in your life or to someone right front of you. No matter what it is, I would say that it is something that is etched in your memory forever.

In the lives of the Apostles – they witnessed quite a few things done by Jesus that would fit right into this category – but the Gospels and the Book of Acts tell us that until the Day of Pentecost – they were still unsure and unable to connect the dots.

Eight days before today's Gospel message, at the pagan center called Caesarea Philippi (with the temple to the pagan god pan and to the emperor) – Jesus asks the Apostles, in this pagan center - who people are saying that He is – and they answer with all sorts of things. Then Jesus says, and he hits them up close and personal – right to the heart - He asks them who “do you say that I am” - and Peter states that he thinks that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and the Son of the Living God. Jesus tells His disciples that His Messiahship will be one of rejection, suffering and death. The very fact that they were following Him meant that their faith was growing and would be severely tested.

And so eight days later, three of them, Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus gleaming like a flash of lightning and talking with the long-dead Moses and Elijah. This Transfiguration reveals who Jesus really is, and verifies the truth of His words about his death and resurrection. This extraordinary event is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10 and Luke 9:28-36. Each account goes into amazing detail and the results are an amazing witnessing of Jesus as God Himself and His true nature – surrounded by light and two witnesses to His Glory.

In the four Gospels we are given an awesome picture of Jesus: as a healer; as an exorcist – driving out demons; as a prophet; God and man who can control nature – with a word. Here we see the ultimate revelation of Jesus in his Transfiguration.

Jesus takes His inner circle of disciples, His most trusted ones - Peter, James and James' brother John, up a high mountain to pray. Luke's Gospel emphasizes the importance of prayer. Some say this is Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon – and either one is an awesomely high mountain that at this time of year is snow peaked. Yes, there is snow in Israel – especially in the high places. These mountains are immense! Moses and Elijah in the Old Testament both had mountain top experiences with God. In today's Old Testament lesson we heard about Moses' mountain top experience. Moses received the commandments on Mount Sinai. On Mount Carmel, Elijah exposed the priests of Baal as false charlatans when God consumed a soaking wet sacrifice. Remember the two bulls?

Jesus was transfigured; the Greek word is μεταμορφώω from which we get the word metamorphosis. It refers to *a whole change of being*. This was for the benefit of the three Apostles and was a glimpse of Jesus as He had been before He took on flesh and became a man. His face shone, reminding us of the way that Moses face shone after he had been in the presence of Almighty God. The white garments – they don't that He tried some new laundry cleaner – it suggested a pure heavenly being. Jesus was there on the mountain with Moses and Elijah. They could symbolize a number of things. I believe that Elijah symbolized the prophets, those who speak on God's behalf. He was expected to come before the Christ to prepare the way for Him. Moses was the deliverer of God's Law and the deliverer of God's people. Moses' work had been finished by Joshua; Elijah's by Elisha -which is another form of the name Joshua, which means 'God is salvation' or 'God saves.'

They now spoke with Jesus or Yeshua (Joshua) about the "exodus" that He was about to accomplish (Matthew's Gospel does not speak of this – but the other two do!). You can see now why I explained that today is the Feast of Transfiguration – which took place before Jesus went to Jerusalem – where He gave Himself completely and totally for mankind and at the hand of mankind. Through His crucifixion He would deliver His people from the bondage of sin and death and bring to fruition the work of both Moses and Elijah. God had a plan – this didn't just happen out of the blue! The ministries of Moses and Elijah both featured suffering and rejection, and Jesus would endure those things at a deeper level. Jesus, as we know – as we are about to head into a 'holy Lent', would endure these things at a much deeper level. Jesus would endure the suffering beyond our comprehension on the cross. He would also experience the rejection of the people who He had come to save, and separation from God as He took upon Himself the punishment for everyone's sins; the sins of the world.

Jesus is the fulfillment, He said so Himself, of the Law and the Prophets. 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 irrelevant, but instead He brings in the New Testament - a new way to God. 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 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.

The cloud makes a statement of its own, suggesting the glory and presence of God. We heard in the Old Testament lesson of the cloud that was on Mount Sinai – and spoke. God also led the

Last Sunday after Epiphany - Feast of Transfiguration – February 26, 2017, Year A
Israelites out of Egypt by a cloud. God spoke just like at Jesus' baptism – with a cloud. 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. How many gentlemen here today have received an affirmation from their dads? With their dads telling them 'I am proud of you son – you've done good!' If it hasn't happened yet – I pray that you will feel that affirmation.

That day on that mountain - Jesus is fully revealed 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. God was telling the world that He was "well pleased" with His Son – 'I am proud of You.' And then He tells the world '*listen to Him.*' 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.

In Matthew and Mark's Gospel - Jesus told the disciples to tell no-one of this until after His resurrection. Why did Jesus order this?

- Firstly to avoid people thinking that He was a political messiah who had come to start a rebellion against the Romans.
- Secondly because the Resurrection provides the strongest evidence to the world that Jesus is the Messiah.

The words of three followers of Jesus about a spectacular appearance on this mountain would soon be dwarfed by over five hundred people seeing the risen Jesus. Luke's account does not include Jesus' command to the disciples not to tell others. But, it is fair to deduce that this event was so unbelievable that they probably would not dare to tell anyone about it – for fear of disbelief. Without a doubt, this vision showed the true majesty and glory of Jesus hidden by His earthly appearance and His earthly humanity.

Let's go back to the beginning of my message. Do you have a memory that is etched in your mind that is as clear today as it was when it happened? Something spectacular, or maybe not so spectacular. I would venture to say that you can remember in exact detail, every detail, even if it was over thirty years ago. In 2 Peter 1:16-18 - Peter remembers quite vividly: "*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." Peter was saying 'we didn't make this up.' God was saying 'Son, I am proud of you!' And He wants the world to know that too. Peter had a vivid recollection of the Transfiguration of Jesus when he wrote this in his second letter. It was probably about thirty to thirty five years afterwards. He uses this to demonstrate that he and the other disciples were 'eyewitnesses to the majesty of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ'. Perhaps he could still hear the words of God resounding in his ears, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" This incident clearly had a profound effect upon Peter as it showed him the true majesty and glory of Jesus that was hidden in spite of His

humanity. The Transfiguration would also have inspired the disciples when things were difficult. You can just imagine Peter, James and John encouraging one another with their recollection of the transfiguration as they were being persecuted.

For each one of us – we can hold onto the facts that:

- This story reveals **the majesty of Jesus**. There are some people who relegate Jesus to being little more than a good man, a great teacher or prophet, possibly even seeing Him as a friend without realizing that He is God first and foremost. The Transfiguration reminds us that, hidden within that human frame, was the fullness of God Himself; the glory, splendor and majesty of God. I don't know about you but I believe that this should help us to realize how our own earthly clothes compare with the shining white of His garments of righteousness and truth. Jesus deserves our honor, praise, worship and wholehearted dedication. When we help out at the church, living and sharing our faith we are not doing it for Fr. John, or even for the church, or the senior warden, or junior warden, past senior wardens or other members of the vestry or even for ourselves, but for the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
- We need to also remember that we can meet with the Lord Jesus - because unlike other leaders of other faiths - He is alive today – His tomb is empty and His Holy Spirit is in our hearts. He may not appear to us in the way He did to the three disciples, but He still reveals Himself to people today. He will speak with us when we stop talking and listen.
- As followers of Jesus we can expect rejection and suffering. Like Moses, like Elijah, like Jesus and like Christians throughout all of history. One of the things that we can comfort ourselves with is that there is something more, something much better to come. The appearance of Jesus in His glory reminds all of us that we will receive spiritual, glorified bodies like His and no longer be subject to pain, illness, suffering, and death, because the old order of things will have passed away. Then we shall be in the presence of Jesus, witnesses of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit for eternity. That is a vision worth living for!