

"The Shining Vision"

Matthew 17: 1-10

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Many of you remember how the first president Bush commented about what he called "the vision thing." Go to any leadership seminar or read any book on the dynamics of leadership these days and you will be told that vision is crucial to leadership. Leaders must have a vision toward which they are moving in order to get people to follow them. In ministerial circles this is often called "vision casting". One of the jobs of church leaders is to cast a vision before the congregation that people can grab hold of that attracts and empowers people in ministry.

What is a vision? A vision is seeing something that does not yet exist as though it does. A visionary is someone who is able to picture something before it's a reality. When Martin Luther King gave his stunning "I Have a Dream" speech back in 1963, he gave everyone a vision. In the poetry and cadence of a whole history of black preachers before him, he painted a verbal picture for America of what our society would look like when black and white live together in peace and dignity. His vision, though not fully implemented yet, still calls us to be something better than what we are.

It's significant that after the transfiguration, on the way down the mountain, Jesus describes what they experienced there as a "vision". It may seem like a small thing, but I think it's important for how we understand this mysterious event in Jesus' life. By calling it a vision, Jesus does not mean that it was merely a psychological or spiritual experience, and therefore not real. After all, there were witnesses to what happened, and one of them, Peter later describes it in his epistle. "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." (II Peter 1: 17-18) Something enormous happened there on the mountain that was burned into Peter's mind, and that guided his life.

So what is this vision all about? In a biblical vision the shroud that veils eternity is pulled back. If only for an instant, the hidden activity of God, woven undetected into the fabric of human history and disguised in ordinary life suddenly becomes visible and real.

On that mountaintop, when Jesus' face glows with brilliant light and even his clothes become luminous, the veil of ordinariness, the shroud of Jesus' normal humanity, was lifted for a moment. The glory of who he really is, the brilliance of his heavenly origin and destiny broke through on that mountain like the sun breaks through the clouds. This vision spoke to Jesus himself as well as his disciples, and it said, "Look! This shining, glorious being is who Jesus really is; fully human, fully divine." When Moses and Elijah appear with him, it is as though the

curtains of time part to show that Jesus continues and perfectly fulfills all that God has revealed in the law and the prophets.

But that's not the climax of the vision. The transfiguring light and the appearance of Moses and Elijah is only the call to worship; the main event is still to come. That happens when the voice of God booms forth, "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" What do those words remind you of? Jesus' baptism, of course. There, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, a similar strange visionary moment occurred. The curtain of eternity was rolled back to reveal God's blessing on Jesus as the Spirit/dove descended and God's voice declared the same words, "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased."

When Jesus received the baptism of John, he decided to identify with sinful human beings and undergo this baptism of repentance in the Jordan's muddy waters. It was his anointing to be our Savior from sin. It was Jesus' first steps along the road that would lead to the cross. When the Son decides to do this, the Father affirms this decision of love with a vision and with his own voice of approval. "This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased."

Now the vision and the voice come to Jesus a second time. What's the context of the transfiguration? Matthew obviously wants us to think about it. He begins the story with the words, "after six days". What happened six days before? In the previous chapter we find the answer. Jesus had taken the disciples to Caesarea Philippi for a kind of retreat. He asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They responded, "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Then Jesus laid it on the line. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, impetuous Peter gets it right, and his testimony becomes the rock on which the church is founded. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But Jesus went on to tell them what this means: that he would undergo suffering, and be killed, and be raised on the third day. This didn't go down with Peter. He said, "God forbid, this must never happen to you." Jesus responded, "Get behind me Satan."

Then, after six days, this numinous vision happens. Matthew is telling us that the purpose of this Transfiguration is much the same as at his baptism. It is God's special way of confirming the pathway Jesus had again chosen. Here, in the middle of Jesus' ministry, when things are about to get crazy, as Jesus begins his death march to Jerusalem, the curtain gets thrown back once again, and Jesus' divine origin and being blazes through his skin and clothes. The voice of God speaks the very same words spoken at his baptism. It is as though the Father is saying to Jesus, "You're on the right path." It's as though by bathing Jesus in divine light the Father prepares the Son for the terrible gloom and darkness that lies down the road. And to the disciples God's voice adds, "Listen to him", especially when he tells you he must go to the cross.

Let's not forget the three disciples. They represent the church. It's important to watch them, especially Peter. What's his reaction to the vision and the voice? Well, typically, Peter speaks

when he should be silent. "Let's build three booths." I love the way Fredrick Brunner uses Peter's response to gently rib the Roman Catholic Church's declaration of the infallibility of the Pope as Peter's successor. He comments, "Peter has issued two encyclicals since his installation-"No Lord," to Jesus' word of the cross, and "I'll make three booths," to the transfiguration-and both encyclicals are as fallible as it is possible for church declarations to be." In other words, Church leadership, epitomized by Peter, who always wants to talk but can't seem to listen, gets put in its place. God's voice tells church leadership what to do: "Stop talking. Start listening to Him!"

What was Peter after with his suggestion to build three booths? Here's the key, I think. That word "booths" (Greek: *skenas*,) is the same word used in Bible for the tabernacle in the wilderness. That's very revealing. Peter wanted to set up a place of worship, a tabernacle. Jesus had told him that he would be killed in Jerusalem, and Peter resisted. "No, this won't happen." To Peter it seemed that his words, "You are the Son of the living God," were vindicated in Christ's blazing glory on the mountaintop. Surely now the cross was no longer necessary. It was a bad idea anyway.

Peter wants to build three tabernacles, so the world can now come up the mountain to the new Zion and find salvation. It's the old time "come on up" religion. It's the religion of glory without a cross, of triumph without suffering, of salvation without sacrifice. It's the mountaintop religion where we try to institutionalize good feelings and wonderful experiences and ignore the real world as much as possible. Let's build three booths, three tabernacles, so the world can come up here to worship.

But it's not God's way. God's way is the coming down religion. God may give us moments of glory on the mountaintop, but they're not places to stay, but only preparation for life down in the valley.

In Taylor Branch's biography of Martin Luther King, the second volume comes to a climax as King travels as the guest of the King of Sweden to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. As the undisputed leader of the movement that had captured the imagination of people around the globe, King was now the toast of governments and crown heads of Europe. No one would have blamed him from retiring from the front lines and going on the lecture circuit. This was his moment of transfiguration. But he did not stay there. The biographer closes the book with these two sentences. "Martin Luther King confronted furies ahead....King's inner course was fixed downward, toward the sanitation workers of Memphis." It was there, of course, that a bullet was waiting.

Jesus sights were fixed downward, toward the cross by which he would redeem the world. And everything he experienced on the mountain-Moses and Elijah, the light of heaven, and especially the voice of the Father, was meant to confirm his downward road to the cross.

So while Peter is still busy making his insipid suggestion, God's voice from the cloud stops him in his tracks. All this was too much for the disciples. "They fell to the ground and were overcome with fear." It's what happens when sinful people like us come face to face with the thundering voice of the Holy One. The holiness of God levels us. The command of God flattens us. Being confronted with God's naked holiness, his commanding voice, the disciples fell face to the ground shaking with fear. I wonder why we expect that all our meetings with God in worship will be happy times, full of inspiration and uplift. The scriptures seem to tell us quite the opposite story. Meeting with God might lift us up or flatten us, and that might not be all that bad.

The good news is what Jesus does now. With what tenderness, what consummate grace, Jesus comes over and touches each one of his failed, confused disciples. "Get up now", he says, "don't be afraid." They open their eyes and they see Jesus, alone. No cloud, No Moses and Elijah, just Jesus alone. And He says, "OK, let's get going." He leads them down the mountain into that deep valley where the face that shined with glory would be contorted in anguish and covered with blood.

But they had a vision. They had a vision of Jesus that would sustain them. That's what visions are all about. They are pictures of the future that keep us going through our present trials and temptations.

This luminous transfiguration on the mountaintop was not only a vision of Jesus' true heavenly glory; it is a vision of our own glorious future. The principle we must always remember when we think about our relationship to Jesus through baptism is this: *whatever happens to Jesus happens to us*. Jesus, says Paul, is the first born of many brothers and sisters who, with him, are bound for glory, who will also one day, "shine like the sun."

Paul must have had this story in mind when he says in II Corinthians 3, "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (3:17,18). When we look on Jesus, entranced by his blazing beauty, longing to learn his loving ways, following him with all our hearts, we are looking in a mirror. A transfiguration is being worked out in our hearts and lives here and now. It's our transfiguration into a true and integrated person in whom God's Spirit dwells. It's a transfiguration of a compassionate heart where Christ's love reigns. It's a picture of what we are becoming in Christ. As we sang today, "Finish then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee: changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise."

On the night before he was killed Martin Luther King preached a sermon in Memphis that,

people later said, seemed to transfigure him. After he finished, he slumped back, completely overcome by the power of the words he had been given to say. "I've been to the mountaintop," he cried. "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

It has been many years since the "I Have a Dream" speech. Since that day King had walked through the flames of trial. He was under attack from all sides. Yet, in that transfigured moment he trusted that in spite of everything God's glory would shine through his human weakness as he shared in Christ's sufferings. And one day, they would all reach the "Promised Land."

We now carry with us the mountaintop vision of Christ's transfiguration and ours. The transfiguration of Jesus calls us to carry the vision back into our lives, no matter how difficult the struggle gets. Through our pain and sufferings, through our frustrations and doubts, we hold to the vision. One day he will bring all his brothers and sisters to share in his glory where we shall, as Peter says, "become participants in the divine nature." And we will all be transfigured. The veil of our fallen humanity will fall away, and we will shine with the glory of our true destiny as God's own sons and daughters through Jesus Christ.

Remember a vision enables us to see what does not yet exist as though it does. In the shining face of Christ on the mountain we are privileged to see how the glory of God will transfigure us, and the whole of creation. We have been to the mountaintop. Our eyes have seen the glory. Now, we must take that vision back with us down the mountain into Monday morning. There we must see everyone we touch and everything we struggle with in the light of this vision of the glory that will be. C. S. Lewis caught this vision in his stunning essay *The Weight of Glory*.

"It may be possible for each of us to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible to think too often or too deeply about that of our neighbor to remember that the dullest, most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics."

In the face of Christ on the mountain we are privileged to see a much greater transfiguration—the transfiguration of the whole creation, the blazing glory of each one of us restored and whole and shining bright.