

Listen to Him!

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing,
Open to us your life-giving word,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit
so that living water may flow out of our hearts—
a spring of hope for our thirsty souls and our thirsty world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

The Greek word for transfiguration is literally *metamorphosis*. *Meta* means “change” and *morphis* means “form.” Jesus’ form was totally changed at the transfiguration. Like a caterpillar transfigured into a butterfly. Like a bulb into a spring flower. Like crucifixion into resurrection.

The transfiguration of Christ takes place smack dab in the middle of Mark’s gospel. It also happens in the highest place in the gospel, “a high mountain.” The first eight chapters of Mark describe Jesus’ ascent: his ministry of healing, teaching, and casting out demons. The last eight chapters describe Jesus’ descent into his passion and death and then his rise to resurrection on the third day. And so the Transfiguration is the fulcrum, the hinge between the ascent and descent of Jesus’ journey. After the Transfiguration, Jesus’ pilgrimage of love will lead us straight

into the 40 days of Lent: through the dying embers of Ash Wednesday, the waving branches of Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, Calvary on Good Friday, and the empty tomb on Easter.



"Transfiguration Blue" by Macha Chmakoff

The heart of the gospel is transformation, even transfiguration. God accepts us as we are, but he doesn't leave us as we are. We're changed. We are a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Let's hear now from our gospel reading from—

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9 (NRSVue)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one^[a] on earth could brighten them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved;^[b] listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Listen to Him!”

“This is my Beloved Son, listen to him.”



I just finished listening to the book “*What an Owl Knows*” by science writer Jennifer Ackerman. It made many Notable Books of 2023 lists. There are so many fascinating things about owls. Owls are the only birds that have eyes on the front of their face—like us. All other birds have their eyes on the sides of their heads.

Owls have twice as many vertebrae as us—which enables them to turn their heads 3/4 of the way around. Owls have huge eyes—if our eyes were proportionally as big as the owl’s, our eyeballs would be the size of oranges.

Even though the owl’s eyes are very big, they SEE most through their...EARS. Owls hear 10x better than humans. Owls are fierce hunters. Part of their success is that they can fly silently, because of the uniqueness of their feathers.

But the owl’s real secret sauce is their HEARING. Owls are guided in pitch black straight to their prey by... LISTENING. In other words, owls SEE with their EARS. Maybe one of the reasons we associate wisdom with owls is because of their listening skills. We can learn from the owl.

“LISTEN TO HIM!”

Immanuel, tap into your INNER-OWL and LISTEN to what Christ is saying. Watch with your ears. Jesus is worth listening to because he’s God’s Beloved Son. He’s the Word made flesh.

Paul tells us in the book of Philippians:

“Though Jesus was in the form of God,
He did not regard equality with God
As something to be exploited or grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself,
Taking the form of a slave,
Being born in human likeness.”

Jesus’ transfiguration gave the disciples a glimpse of this “form of God” in Jesus. The early church father Chrysostom put it this way:

“What does transfigured mean? It means he opened out a little of the godhead and showed them the indwelling deity.”

...

There is a scene in Exodus where God put Moses in a cleft in a rock and covers him until God passes by with his afterglow. Moses's sees God, but only his back, not his face. In our scene here, Jesus manifested his true self for Peter, James, and John to glimpse in the cleft of the rock of Mt. Hermon. Seeing Jesus, we see God.

Six days after being proclaimed Messiah by Peter, and predicting his death, Jesus needed to get away to pray on a mountain retreat. He needed to prepare for his journey to the cross. Jesus didn't go alone on this journey—he took with him three of the twelve disciples—the inner-circle of Peter, James, and John.

This scene takes us back to another scene in the book of Exodus. It was on this mountain, that Moses ascended with three of his followers—Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like heaven in clearness. A cloud descended on the mountain. Clouds are symbols of life and hope—providing shade from the sun. Clouds are symbolic. They're symbols of life and hope—providing shade from the sun. God led Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day. Clouds shroud and show God's glory. In the Psalms, God is called "the one who rides upon the clouds." God revealed himself to Moses in a cloud. And here a bright cloud appears at Jesus' transfiguration.

Moses waited six days before he would make his ascent. So too would Jesus with the three. Our destinies are intertwined. It was on the mountain, that God affirmed Jesus' journey to the cross. Miraculously on that mountain, Jesus' face shown like the sun and his clothes glittered like gold and dazzled like stars.

Then two new characters appeared on the journey—Moses and Elijah. Moses gave the Law. Elijah was the greatest of the Prophets. Both the Law and the Prophets testified to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. All three men had mountaintop experiences:

- **Moses** received the 10 Commandments on a mountain.
- **Elijah** heard the still small voice on a mountain.
- **Jesus** taught on a mountain, was transfigured on a mountain, and would be crucified on a mountain.

Then Peter—*thank God for him*—ever the man of action, filled the mystery with mansplaining, "Wow this is cool! Moses and Elijah! Let's...build something!!!"

While Peter's jaws were still flapping—a bright cloud appeared and overshadowed the six of them. This bright cloud was none other than the shekinah glory—the very presence of the living God. God's resounding voice of affirmation spoke from the cloud:

*"This is my Beloved Son in whom I delight.
My favor rests upon him.
LISTEN TO HIM!!!!"*

Notice God didn't say, "These are my three sons, listen to them." No, God says "This is my Beloved Son, listen to him."

Learn from the owl and LISTEN. Boom—they hit the ground—flat on their backs. The presence of our Holy and Almighty God will scare the pants off any man, woman or child. When Peter, John, and James recovered, they LOOKED UP. When they RAISED their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus alone.

Yes, we love Moses and Elijah—we study and savor their stories in Scripture. We look up to them—they inspire us. But at the end of the day, JESUS STANDS ALONE—head and shoulders above the rest. Jesus stands and helps us to stand up and not be afraid. And Jesus walks with us where we need to go next.

Metamorphosis, change, is scary. Life is always changing—just sometimes we're more aware of it, than others. There are changes we make. And changes that are made for us or to us. Changes of gain. Changes of loss. Neutral changes. Needed change can be discombobulating. Even good change can be frightening. We're preparing for change at Immanuel. Change is scary because we're entering unfamiliar and mysterious terrain. We can't imagine what's next because we haven't been there yet. We like the comfort and predictability of the status quo—even if it's miserable. At least we know what it is. We like our creature comforts. Change has a way of putting us flat on our backs—just ask the disciples.

Jesus faced his fears too—willingly descending into the valley of the shadow of death for us—to once and for all scatter those shadows with his shimmering light. His transfiguration was like a lantern in the dark to face the shadows and come back alive. With Christ, we can REVERE, not fear. Flat on our backs we pray to Jesus standing over us:

- I want to be transformed and transfigured into your image.
- I don't want to be stuck in my old ways.
- Help me to adapt. To grow. To learn. To change. To move into the exciting and challenging newness you have for me.

Hear the good news Immanuel: Our God is a God of the mountains. Mountains are spiritually symbolic—they bring us closer to God. Both the Mount of Transfiguration and The Mount of Crucifixion. Mount Hermon and Mount Calvary. These are two very different mountain top experiences. And, God is there at both mountains. God uses both mountains to grow us, to stretch us, to transform us.

- On one mount, God is revealed in glory,
- on the other, God is revealed in shame.
- On one mount, Christ's clothes glitter,
- on the other, Christ's clothes will be wrenched from him and gambled away.
- On one mount, Jesus is surrounded by Moses and Elijah,
- on the other, Jesus is surrounded by two thieves.
- On one mount a bright cloud appears,
- on the other, darkness descends.

- On one mount, Peter blurts out the wonder of things,
- on the other, Peter denies Jesus.
- On one mount, the voice of God declares that Jesus is the Beloved,
- on the other, the voice of a Roman soldier declares,
 "surely this man was the Son of God."

This is our hope of transfiguration—believing that God is in it all,

- the laughter and the tears,
- the shame and the glory,
- the pain and the joy,
- the victory and the defeat,
- the despair and the hope,
- in life and death.

Of all days, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1945. When the bomb was first being tested, J. Robert Oppenheimer saw it explode and he quoted from the Bhagvad Gita, where the god Krishna reveals himself in all his horrific glory: "I am become Death, destroyer of worlds."

Oppenheimer saw the explosion of the bomb as a transfiguration, actually a disfiguration of scientific discovery into horror and death. But the transfiguration of Jesus is an entirely different kind of transformation. It was a change that revealed life, glory, and eternity, the radiance of God's glory. And so we have the opportunity to choose between what kind of transfiguration we want to be identified with and changed by.

Jesus' transfiguration reminds us, his destiny and our destiny are intertwined. As Jesus says in Matthew 13:43:

"The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God."

Immanuel, let us listen to Christ and let Christ shine through us, giving light and hope to the darkness.

Amen.

Sermon Art:

"Transfiguration" by Hanna Borowska

"Transfiguration Blue" by Macha Chmakoff

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