

Matthew 17:1-9

A DIFFERENT LOOK

My friend “Bob” is an easy-going, laid-back kind of guy. Nothing seems to upset him – or so I always thought. But one day he showed me a different look; I saw a side of Bob I had never experienced. Bob had moved to Maryland but he was in Richmond and he stopped by the house. I noticed he was driving a different car, so at some point I said to Bob, “You got a new car; it looks nice!” Bob replied, “Well, it’s new to me but it’s not new; in fact, it’s the same year, make, and model as my previous one.” I asked, “Was your other car in an accident?” Bob said, “No.” “Did you have too many miles on the other car?” Bob answered, “No, about the same mileage.” I guessed again, “Did you get tired of your green car and trade it in for this candy-apple red car?” Bob said “No.” Finally, I said to Bob, “I’m all out of questions, except for this one: Why did you trade your other car for this one?”

Here’s his answer and you’re not going to believe it but it’s true. Bob said, “When I moved to Maryland I went to the Department of Motorized Vehicles for a new license plate. I waited in line for an hour. Finally, when I got to the counter, I produced my papers and the clerk told me I was missing a certain document. So, I went home, got the necessary paper, and came back to the DMV. I waited in line another hour and when the clerk finally waited on me, she told me that I should have brought another paper or document with me.” I asked, “So then what did you do?” Bob said, “I headed straight to a car dealer, bought this car instead, and let the dealership put a brand new license plate on it. I wasn’t about to go back to the DMV and wait in line another hour!”

I have always thought of Bob as being very easy-going, unflappable, and laid-back. However, that experience gave me a new insight and a different look where my friend was concerned. Like any one of us, he too has his limits on being patient!

That opening story serves to introduce the text from Matthew’s gospel concerning the transfiguration of Jesus whereby three of the disciples got a completely different look at Jesus on the mountaintop. Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in an entirely new light. Jesus’ appearance changed right before their very own eyes – glorious light poured forth from and surrounded his face and even his clothes dazzled with bright light. I can’t explain to you what exactly happened up there. I reached for several books that focus on preaching through the liturgical church year, holidays and holy days, and I noticed that those authors didn’t touch Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday with a ten-foot pole! The best clue that we

have is given by Jesus himself in verse 9: “Tell no one about the vision,” which is to say that God somehow gave the disciples the ability to see “a different look” or side of Jesus than they had seen before. And what a sight to see!

The transfiguration account is an attempt to say that Peter, James, and John got a peek, a glimpse of Jesus in his heavenly countenance. For a brief moment in time, they saw Jesus in all of his divine and radiant glory prior to his incarnation and following his death, resurrection, and ascension. The curtain of human flesh was pulled back to reveal Jesus as he really and truly is and where he is ultimately headed. The reality of Jesus’ divine nature was underscored by the very same voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” The Voice gave divine endorsement to Jesus as the Messiah, the one anointed and sent by God.

But that’s not all! The disciples also saw another side to Jesus, a necessary perspective on their Master which would begin to prepare them for what lay ahead. It’s important to notice not only the content of the vision but also the context of this transfiguration story. In that regard, Matthew placed this story in between two of Jesus’ disclosures about his pending journey to Jerusalem – there, he would suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised. In fact, afterwards, Jesus ordered the disciples to say nothing about the vision “until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Jesus’ sparkling clothes were not only a revelation of heavenly glory; the glowing garments were also vivid symbols of martyrdom (Revelation 6:10-11). The disciples not only experienced Jesus in his exaltation, they also saw signs of his upcoming suffering and death. The sudden appearance of Moses and Elijah - the greatest of the law-givers and the greatest of all the prophets, as well as the herald of the Messiah - served to confirm Jesus as Messiah while also pointing to Jesus as the suffering Servant, who journeyed forth to die. The Voice from the cloud also told the disciples to “listen to Jesus!” – pay attention, obey him, and follow him at all costs!

Soon, the vision was over and the disciples saw no one except Jesus only. The transfiguration was but for a moment. It wasn’t intended to be permanent, which is why Peter’s suggestion to build three booths went unheeded. Instead, there was work to do in the valley of human need. Jesus told the disciples, as they came down the mountain, not to tell anyone because it wasn’t the right time. I’m quite sure the three disciples (with a great sigh of relief!) were only too glad to comply with their Master’s instruction.

That’s the gospel lesson. Now then, what’s the application of the scripture to our lives? This is what I like to call the “So what?” part of the sermon. The transfiguration account inspires us to take a different look at Jesus and be reminded that he is both Lord and Savior - the One who sits on the right hand of God in heavenly glory is the very One who suffered, died, and rose again for us

all. To see him in this light is to be reminded that we are to listen to him, follow him, obey him, and live out God's will in our lives – just as he did! When we do that, our own nature can be transfigured, transformed, through our commitment to the Christ. The glory of Jesus shines through us whenever we love and act on that love toward others.

There is a vast difference between hoarding our faith and sharing our faith by loving and doing for others; it is the difference between night and day. Or, to use another vivid example, it's the difference between coming into the sanctuary and looking up at the balcony – it's one thing to look at the darkened stained-glass window depicting the transfiguration of Jesus; it's quite another experience to flip the switch, turn the lights on, and marvel at the beauty of the rich colors, beautiful artistry, and superb craftsmanship.

An elderly man's sons and daughters frequently lost patience with their widowed father. He lived with seemingly needless privation, wearing clothes until they were almost threadbare, denying himself comforts and pleasures his family thought should be his. After his death his checkbook told the full story: help on education costs for a fatherless family, generous commitment to the Boston City Missionary Society, a small trust for his grandchildren, and on and on. The checkbook transfigured the familiar picture of a man either indifferent to himself or close-fisted toward others into a reality of an altogether different sort. (Robert E. Luccock, *Preaching Through Matthew*, p. 151)

The table of our Lord Jesus Christ is prepared for us. Jesus is the Host and he beckons us to come and sup with him. As we come into his glorious presence, Jesus feeds our souls and fulfills our longings. Then, just as Jesus, Peter, James, and John left the mountain and went down into the valley, I trust that we too will go forth to reveal the glory of God by doing the will and work of God in our lives – for the sake of others.

Then, in the process, we too will be transfigured, changed more and more into the very likeness of the Christ – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA

February 3, 2008