

Transfiguration

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

March 27, 2022

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Luke 9:18–43 (NIV)

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “God’s Messiah.”

Jesus Predicts His Death

²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²² And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

²³ Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? ²⁶ Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

²⁷ “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.”

The Transfiguration

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)

³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

Jesus Heals a Demon-Possessed Boy

³⁷ The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him.

³⁸ A man in the crowd called out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. ³⁹ A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not.”

⁴¹ “You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.”

⁴² Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And they were all amazed at the greatness of God.

The true story

Who is Jesus? What is his vocation? Important clues are revealed in the story of Jesus' transfiguration on a mountain top. There are a couple of keys. When Jesus was speaking with Elijah and Moses, they spoke of Jesus' "departure." The Greek word used is *exodos*, for, indeed, Jesus is going to Jerusalem to create a new exodus. This will not be a flight from slavery to pharaoh but from slavery to sin. Jesus will be the lamb whose blood is shed for the sake of Israel and, hence, the world. The second key is to read on in Luke and see that all the gospel writers immediately tell of a sick boy whom the disciples cannot heal while waiting below.

It is tempting to stay on the mountain top, but the world beckons.

There is always God's work to be done.

From the Son of Man to the Transfiguration. The gospels challenge us and beguile us. Mystery and uncertainty. I suppose we should expect nothing less when we speak of the Creator becoming enfleshed. God and Man. Savior and Sufferer. So let's take a trip to Galilee two millennia ago and see it for ourselves.

A mountain

When you visit Galilee the first time, it becomes apparent why most of Jesus' ministry happens at the Sea of Galilee. Venture inland to the west and the terrain quickly becomes hilly and difficult; it is no easy walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. Nonetheless, in the midst of the Galilean hills, Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain where Jesus' glory was revealed. Do we know exactly which mountain or hill? No, but Mt. Tabor is a good candidate and is often remembered as the Mt. of the Transfiguration. In addition, there are several wonderful look-out spots nearby that give amazing views of Galilee, enabling you to take in the big picture. Jesus would take Peter, James, and John up a mountainside, where all three disciples thought they had found the "big picture."

The three

Peter and James and John had known each other for a long time. They had met in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. "Follow me," Jesus had said, "and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was.

Simon Peter

The disciple we know as Simon Peter was born just Simon (actually, Simeon in Hebrew), the son of a man named Jonah. We know little from the Bible about Simon's life before he met Jesus. We know that he and his brother, Andrew, worked as fishermen in the Sea of Galilee. Simon lived in Capernaum and spoke with a Galilean accent. He was married and his wife's mother lived with them. In the Gospels, Simon Peter is seen as the central figure among the disciples.

Nonetheless, it is Simon Peter who would three times deny even knowing Jesus after Jesus' arrest. After Pentecost, Peter led the church in Jerusalem. He carried the Good News throughout Judea and brought the first uncircumcised Gentile to faith in Christ, a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10).

"Peter" was actually a nickname given Simon by Jesus. The nickname meant "rock," which was *Cephas* in Aramaic¹, *Petros* in Greek, and *Peter* in English. At the time, Peter was not used as a proper name in Palestine.

1. The everyday language of Jesus and his disciples.

There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

A Theophany?

A theophany is a manifestation of God. A pillar of fire, a cloud, a burning bush, even a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:9-18). The cloud and the voice in the transfiguration story are theophanies. It is God made visible to our senses.

But Jesus’ transfiguration is not a theophany. D. A. Hare speaks of the transfiguration as a “Christophany.” Jesus’ transfiguration is not about his divinity, it is about his Messiahship. Jesus stands alongside Moses and Elijah. No Jew would have considered either of them to be divine. Jesus is a transformed human in the transfiguration, but he is still human. Peter speaks to Jesus as he always did. It is not Jesus’ transformed appearance that strikes fear in Peter and the others. They collapse only after the cloud and the voice.

This may seem rather unimportant to you. But this is one more example of how we can get off track unless we realize that no Jew of Jesus’ day conceived of the Messiah as being divine. The Messiah might have been God’s hand-picked #2, but the Messiah was to be human. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, he is not declaring Jesus to be divine. Our reading of the Gospels will be made much clearer if we keep this in mind.

Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews *knew* the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews *knew* that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum *knew* all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

A glimpse of glory

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk. “Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn’t go together. The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter “Satan” for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.¹ Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst

themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question – Can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples’ world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

¹Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.

We are struck by Peter's desire to set up tents for everyone on the mountainside, as if he could hang on to this moment for all time. As Rev. Allison Jean pointed out to me, Peter is ready to stand by Jesus' side during this transcendent mountain-top experience. But he would prove unwilling to stand beside Jesus at the cross. We are like Peter in this. We are ready for all the moving, inspiring, uplifting mountains that God wants to give us. But when it comes to darkness and suffering, we have trouble seeing Jesus in any of it. As Allison put it, "Jesus will always call us to leave the mountain eventually, because that is not where the work is to be done."

And, indeed, Jesus comes down the mountain. There is healing to be done and the disciples tried but failed to heal the demon-possessed boy. So, as Jesus always did, he took what was brought to him, blessed it, and gave it back -- here, returning the healed child to his father. Mountain or not -- Jesus is Jesus.

Luke the Preacher

Luke wrote two volumes, Luke and Acts, sometime around 80AD, about 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Luke is a well-educated man who writes in a sophisticated Greek. Luke's immediate audience is Theophilus, who is a follower of Jesus but new to the faith, and, perhaps, a patron of Luke's.

Though Luke is explicitly writing a history, he is also a preacher. He has a theological story to tell about Jesus, the Spirit, and God's work to redeem humanity and all creation. Today's passage from Luke is a great example. It marks the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the story of which spans ten chapters. The geography of this journey jumps around in ways that don't seem too realistic if one's focus is only on the itinerary. But Luke is less interested in the geography and timeline of it all, then he is helping us to grasp the growing tension surrounding Jesus' ministry and Jesus' determination to stay faithful to his mission. He uses the journey motif as a way of helping us to see that God is always active and caring, moving us forward in history toward a goal, namely, the full consummation of God's kingdom.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

We continue our study of Isaiah.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.