

Taking Off The Veil

2 Kings 2:6-14
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-8

Sometimes a glimpse is enough.

A sermon preached by
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When I was a young child, *The Wizard of Oz* was one of my least favorite movies.¹ Still, we watched the 1939 classic over and over, seemingly on an annual basis. I think my mom liked Judy Garland, and she thought the munchkins were cute. So she assumed we shared her appreciation of the movie. But to my young mind, *The Wizard of Oz* was a horror movie. There was a tornado, a very wicked witch, and those flying monkeys scared me to death. Even the talking scarecrow and the tin man kind of creeped me out. I was OK with the cuddly, cowardly lion.

One of the scariest scenes in the movie is when Dorothy and her entourage enter the palace of the great wizard. They are shaking in their ruby slippers as they confront the great face of Oz and the fire and the booming voice. Then Toto, the little dog, pulls back the curtain to reveal a little old man manipulating the appearance and the voice of the wizard. In one of the most iconic movie lines ever, he shouts into the microphone, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!” But it’s too late. The wizard has been revealed for the fraud he is. There’s nothing to be scared of.

In the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, Mark says the disciples were terrified. But there was nothing to be afraid of. There was no false wizard behind the curtain. It was a glimpse of the glory of God.

The Transfiguration (or Metamorphosis, as some translate it), happened six days after a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. He asked the disciples what people were saying about him, and they said that some thought he was John the Baptist come back to life, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. But Jesus said, “Who, then, do you say that I am?” Peter made the great confession, “*You are the Christ.*”²

The confession triggered Jesus’ first prediction of his passion, death, and resurrection, “*that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.*”³ This upset the disciples, especially Peter, so Jesus called everyone together and told them to take up their

own cross and be prepared to die for him. That was scary. But the last thing he said was that some would not taste death before they saw the Kingdom of God come with power.

Having six days to think about those words, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain somewhere. Scholars spill ink debating which mountain; it doesn't really matter. Once they were away by themselves, the clothes of Jesus began to shine with a supernatural white light. Matthew and Luke also say his face began to shine. The Gospel readers would have made a connection to the glowing face of Moses as he came down from Mount Sinai having seen God. Or they would have remembered the Jewish legends that said that the clothes God made for Adam and Eve were not made of leather, but were made of light.⁴ As Paul said, Jesus was the new Adam.⁵

As the disciples watched in wonder, Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. Sometimes we think about these two as symbolizing the Law and the Prophets, and that's not wrong. But Amy Jill Levine points out that Elijah was not a great representative of the prophets, not having left any writings. What these three did have in common was that they all defeated death in some way. Moses died in the land of Moab, but Deuteronomy says his grave was never found.⁶ The tradition had stories of Moses talking with God after his death. Elijah was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot.⁷ Jesus would experience resurrection. Here was a glimpse of the power of God that says death is not the final answer.

As if for comedic effect, Peter speaks up and offers to build a tent for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. As if they were going to camp out for the weekend on the mountain. But give Peter a break; he was scared and overwhelmed and didn't know what to say. So like most of us, he said something stupid.

Suddenly a cloud overshadowed the mountain. That's not an unusual occurrence, but this was an unusual cloud. The word "overshadow" was used two other times in Scripture: when the cloud overshadowed Mount Sinai, and when the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin Mary at the annunciation of Jesus' birth. Sure enough, this was a supernatural cloud, because a voice came from the cloud: "*This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*"⁸ Peter and James and John had not heard this before, but the reader has—at the baptism of Jesus.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the metamorphosis was over. Jesus was standing there. He hadn't said a word, but the message was clear. The mountain, the clothes, the visitors, the cloud, the voice—they had seen a glimpse of the glory of God! As Lamar Williamson wrote, the Transfiguration "communicates in visual and auditory terms a fleeting perception of the eternal splendor, an elusive awareness of the divine presence."⁹ William Barclay points out that the Transfiguration is a strong antidote to the dire prediction of the suffering and death of Jesus, and it gives the disciples a wonderful witness to share, when the time comes to share it.¹⁰

As I so often ask, what does this mean? How does this story inform or empower our discipleship and witness today?

This is not a good text to give us a plan for success. You really can't draw out of the Transfiguration principles of effective discipleship. This won't make your marriage or your parenting or your finances or your career any better. Because it's not about us. Sometimes we preachers are bad about trying to build tents in the presence of the Holy. But Paul reminds us that "*we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.*"¹¹ All we are looking for here is "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*"¹²

The main thing we need to get out of the story of the Transfiguration is, “Wow!”¹³ Just wow! Our God is so awesome! Jesus is so cool and magnificent and incredible. It’s just delightful and overwhelming and scary and fantastic all at the same time. We have an amazing God. Amen?

Philip Yancey, the Christian author, riffs on the awesomeness of God by looking at the dimensions of the universe. Did you know, if the Milky Way galaxy were the size of the entire continent of North America, our solar system would fit in a coffee cup? The Voyager 1 spacecraft was launched on September 5, 1977—46 years ago—and as of October 2023, it was approximately 15 billion miles away from our planet, making it Earth’s most distant spacecraft. Voyager 1 is currently zipping through space at around 38,000 mph, according to NASA. Light takes 22½ hours to travel from Voyager 1 to arrive at Earth.

And yet, Voyager 1 is still very much inside the Milky Way galaxy, along with several hundred billion stars and planets. The Milky Way is one of an estimated 100 billion galaxies in the universe. Scientists have calculated that light from the theoretical edge of the universe would take 15 billion years to reach earth.¹⁴

That’s just amazing, right? To even try to conceive of the breadth and width and height and depth of creation and the awesomeness of the God who made it. Then to think that God would show God’s self to us in Jesus Christ and even just for a moment pull back the curtain and let us get a glimpse of God’s eternal glory. It fills our hearts and minds with awe and a deep, deep sense of humility.

St. Thomas Aquinas is perhaps the most famous theologian of the medieval period. He lived in the 13th century. His greatest work is called the *Summa Theologica*, a summary of theology, that he wrote as a training manual for priests in seminary. English translations are still available, and they run about 3,000-plus pages. Unfortunately, Thomas left his great summary of theology unfinished. On December 6, 1273, Thomas abruptly stopped his work. That day, while celebrating Mass, Thomas had a transfiguring experience. He caught a glimpse of eternity, and suddenly he knew that all his efforts to describe God fell so far short that he decided never to write again.

When his secretary, a monk named Reginald, tried to encourage him to do more writing, he said, “Reginald, I can do no more. Such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as so much straw.” Firm in his resolve, Thomas Aquinas never wrote another word and died a year later.¹⁵

Maybe that is not the response God was hoping for; I don’t know. But I do know that a glimpse of eternity can radically alter your perspective. A moment to pull back the curtain and get even a slight perception of the eternal splendor is enough to change your life. It provides comfort and strength and assurance for a long time.

Eight years ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, I shared with you that my father died in 1989. It was the worst emotional blow, up to that point, that I had ever experienced. About a month after he died in October, we had gone through our first Thanksgiving without him, an empty chair at the head of the table because nobody wanted to sit in his spot. The Christmas holidays were coming up, and I knew they were going to be hard as well. One afternoon, I was praying in the prayer chapel at the church I was serving at the time. I don’t remember what, if anything specific, I was praying about. Suddenly, out of the blue, I heard my dad’s voice, as clear as it could be. He said four little words: “It’s so good here.” Then the voice was gone. My eyes flew open, half-expecting to see my father

sitting beside me. He wasn't. But there was a shimmering, glorious quality to the air around me, almost a glow, that lasted for a few seconds, then faded.

I can't explain it; I can only share the story. I believe as firmly now as I did over thirty years ago that it was a glimpse, a moment of glory, a brief peek into the world of the spirit, a gift that God gave to me just when I needed it most. God lifted the veil, pulled back the curtain, let the boundary dissolve just for a second, and I received an assurance about my dad and my God and my life. I'm sure the disciples never forgot their night on the mountain. I have never forgotten my glimpse of glory in the prayer chapel.

Even if the Transfiguration does not give us an actionable plan, I think there are some takeaways for your week. First of all, pay attention. The fraudulent Wizard of Oz said "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" I say, pay attention to the God behind the curtain of reality. God is alive and active in the world and wants to do something special with your life. Listen for God's voice. Listen to the voice that says listen to Jesus. Pay attention to the life and teachings and death and resurrection of Jesus. He will give you a glimpse of eternity that will ground your life today.

Second takeaway: You can be the glimpse of eternity somebody else sees. Do you ever watch cooking shows? Lots of people are really into them, and I'll admit, they can be kind of addictive, especially when there's a competition going on.

Tim Challies, a pastor in Canada, wrote a blog called "Good Things Happen When My Wife Watches Cooking Shows." What happens is that Tim's wife watches an excellent chef perform, and then she wants to get in the kitchen and imitate what she saw—try the new recipe, experiment with a technique. And Tim gets the benefit of her imitation.

He wrote, "Cooking shows are meant to be entertaining, but they are also meant to be inspiring. They are meant to attract viewers, but also to inspire imitators. And in that way, they are a little glimpse of the way we should all live our lives. For in some ways every life should be a show, a public demonstration of virtue, a display of character, a demonstration of practical godliness. Every life should be lived in such a way that it inspires others to imitate it."¹⁶

If we have seen the glory of Jesus Christ, we are inspired to want to be like him. Even better if someone sees our imitation of Christ and wants to be like us. Paul said, "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*"¹⁷ This is not about ego or pride; it's more than a show. It's actually humbly offering our lives as an example of what it means to follow Christ, warts and failures and stumbles and all. As D. T. Niles, the great Methodist pastor from Sri Lanka, put it, "Evangelism is witness. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food."¹⁸ What if someone sees our life and develops a hunger for Christ? What if someone gets around us and gets a taste of love and mercy and peace? What if someone looks at us and sees "the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"? We can be someone's glimpse of eternity.

Here's your main takeaway today: We worship an awesome God. Our God is the God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus. Our God is the God of Peter and James and John. Our God is the One who created the unfathomable universe yet numbers the hairs of our head. Our God can overshadow a mountaintop in Galilee and make it shine with supernatural light and speak out of the cloud and give those frightened disciples an experience of glory they never forgot. And we are still telling the story today! Our God is an awesome God! Let all the people of God say, "Wow!"

¹ Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allen Wolf, *The Wizard of Oz*, based on the book by L. Frank Baum (Warner Brothers, 1939).

² Mark 8:29.

³ Mark 8:31.

⁴ Amy Jill Levine, *Mark: A Beginner's Guide To The Good News* (Nashville: Abingdon 2023), 62.

⁵ Cf. Romans 5:12ff., I Corinthians 15:45.

⁶ Deuteronomy 34:6.

⁷ 2 Kings 2:11.

⁸ Mark 9:7.

⁹ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 159.

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 211.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:5.

¹² 2 Corinthians 4:6.

¹³ James Howell, *Weekly Preaching Notions*, "What Can We Say February 11?"

<https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁴ Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 20.

Information updated October 2023: "How Far is Voyager 1 from Earth?" *The Sky Live*.

¹⁵ "Reasons to Fear Easter," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 116. Cf.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Aquinas.

¹⁶ Tim Challies blog, "Good Things Happen When My Wife Watches Cooking Shows," Challies.com, September 25, 2020.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 11:1.

¹⁸ D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, , 1951), 96.