

# **When the Kingdom of God Really Comes Near**

**Matthew 17: 1-9**

**Exodus 34: 29-35**

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**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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The Sunday before Lent is traditionally set aside to commemorate the glorious mystery of Christ's transfiguration, one of those mystical events in the gospels defying any rational explanations.

Several weeks back I mentioned the Jefferson Bible. Christ's Transfiguration is one of those mystical stories Thomas Jefferson deleted from his cut-and-paste bible because it offended his enlightened sensibilities. Since then, despite years of modern scholarship demystifying the gospels, the postmodern Church still points to the transfiguration as confirmation of the reality of God's kingdom being nearer than we think.

The unexpected emergence of God's kingdom popping up from nowhere has been a continuous theme in my sermons for the past two months. Before the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus can make any sense, everything about him must be put in the context of the inevitable coming of God's Kingdom.

Wasn't that the primary theme of Jesus' preaching? "The kingdom of God is at hand... the kingdom of God is within you..." God's kingdom comes whenever, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

From the time we were children we've been taught Jesus suffered and died for our sins, but very little was said about the centrality of God's kingdom in God's plan for our salvation. That's why it's essential for Christians to realize Jesus' death on the cross saved us by reversing the creation's downward spiral to death and destruction to make way for the Kingdom's eventual coming.

In the meantime, we're instructed to live in this world according to the Sermon on the Mount. We're to behave as if the God's kingdom is already here in all its glory.

But your own personal experience tells you sometimes God's kingdom seems like it's a million miles away. That's why the scriptures assure us that since we can't always experience the presence of the Kingdom, God encoded into our spiritual DNA the capacity to put our faith into practice. We learn to believe without seeing, trusting in God's intervention at the right place and time.

The story of Christ's transfiguration is a case in point.

I think this is true. We usually perceive Jesus as always being cool, calm and collected, always in control of the situation. This image is reinforced by many of the Hollywood films telling the story of Jesus' life.

But when you read between the lines in the Gospels, you find hints of Jesus' growing angst from the time of his baptism up until the end of his ministry. We can only wonder how his mounting responsibilities affected him psychologically.

For example, the Gospels never tell us what went through Jesus' mind when it dawned on him that he was the chosen one, the long expected Messiah.

We also don't know Jesus' gut reaction when he realized he was fully human and divine.

Except for his breakdown in the Garden of Gethsemane, we know nothing about the inner turmoil he endured when he realized he was born to suffer and die on a Roman cross.

We modern readers are conditioned to need to know about these things. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John weren't interested in assembling Jesus' psychological profile. Their only directive was to tell the greater story of God's ultimate plan to bring heaven to earth.

How does Christ's transfiguration fit into this larger narrative and why does the Church go out on a limb and continue to claim this fantastic story so quickly dismissed by so many as pure bunkum?

Let's begin with this: The transfiguration was a timely demonstration of God's kingdom momentarily piercing the veil between heaven and earth. At that moment, Jesus was given a gift. His humanity could no longer contain his divinity, suddenly shining through every pore of his body. As his appearance was transformed, his clothing became dazzling white. Most certainly his transfiguration was a much appreciated foretaste of the glory he'd experience again on the day of resurrection.

To top it all off, Moses and Elijah suddenly appeared, encouraging Jesus to trust and obey, to keep pushing on to the cross.

All of these mystical happenings were signs, testifying to God's Kingdom coming near at the precise moment Jesus needed all the affirmations he could get, especially after realizing his rendezvous with the cross was inevitable.

Several days before his transfiguration Jesus informed the disciples he was going to Jerusalem. Once there, he would be rejected by the religious establishment and handed over to the Romans for execution. Peter immediately tried to talk to Jesus out of going, causing Jesus to accuse Peter of being Satan because Jesus was tempted to let Peter talk him out of it.

So the timing of the transfiguration was God's timing. Naturally, we're still curious about whether or not Jesus expected anything unusual to happen after he climbed up the mountain, but as I said, we can only speculate.

Ultimately, after all is said and done, the main thing if not the only thing we need to know about this is this: Through his transfiguration, Jesus was fortified and reinvigorated,

especially after hearing that voice from the bright cloud saying, “This is my beloved son, with him I am well pleased; Listen to him!”

That last command was directed to Peter, James and John but the transfiguration itself was all for Jesus, just as Moses’ mountain top encounter with God was all for Moses. Both needed shots in the arm to carry out their respective assignments to bring God’s kingdom closer to the world.

Today’s lectionary readings are about mystical encounters with the awesome presence of God. Moses’ face turned shining bright. Transcendent light seeped through every pore of Jesus’ body.

Since nothing like this ever happens to us, we can only imagine what it’s like to stand before God, feeling puny and overwhelmed by the great I AM WHO I AM.

At the same time, this story leaves us wondering, “Why doesn’t something like that ever happen to me?”

I’m sure Thomas Jefferson asked the same question. Confining himself to the limitations of the scientific method, Jefferson could only conclude any mystical happenings in the bible are at worst, fantasies concocted by Jesus’ disciples or at best, unfortunate metaphors to illustrate the greatness of Jesus.

On the other hand, many of us do believe in these stories. After all, since God is God, why can’t God break the laws of nature? What’s to keep God from revealing mystical signs and wonders to the favored few? But that begs the question, why only the favored few?

Then again, how many times have you and I encountered God without even realizing it?

Nobody on this side of heaven can ever explain why God doesn’t speak to us from a cloud or momentarily transfigures our bodies into the new bodies. Still, God does make his presence known, usually in very ordinary and even unattractive ways, but especially whenever God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

There are people you know who can tell you God’s kingdom came so near to them, they felt compelled to remove their sandals because they were treading on holy ground. Sometimes these people were open to the reality of God’s emerging kingdom. More often, they weren’t expecting anything to happen and were surprised when it did.

Jesus predicted this in his parable of the Final Judgment. Those standing on his right hand were surprised to learn they fed, clothed and welcomed Christ himself by helping the least of these.

Others will tell you they encountered the glory of God watching a beautiful sunset or at the birth of a baby, even when standing by the deathbed of a loved one. Music that lifts the soul,

silently praying over the scriptures, being outside in a meadow or inside in a sanctuary, even just sitting alone in your house are all opportunities for the Kingdom of God to come near.

When your conscience is pricked and moves you to repentance, or a sudden craving for justice compels you to take a stand, these are the other occasions to tread the holy ground of God's kingdom.

God asks all of us, believers and skeptics alike to go out on a limb and believe the stories in the Old and New Testaments because these stories survived and were passed down to prepare the way for the glory of God to heal and restore our broken yet salvageable world.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near."

The Jews revered the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God's Kingdom came near. Then, quite unexpectedly, everything changed. Especially on the cross, Jesus's body became that sacred space, the thin veil interconnecting heaven and earth, not to prove Jesus' divinity but to continue the process of salvation by making the new heaven and earth possible.

The prophet Isaiah's imagery gives us a glimpse of what this new heaven and earth will look like.

The wolf shall lie down with the  
lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with  
the kid,  
The calf and the lion and the  
fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead  
them...  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy Mountain;  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the  
Lord,  
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6&9)

This Wednesday, we will gather again to begin our Lenten pilgrimage around our Lord's Table. We will honor Jesus' request to remember him as the new temple, the holy of holies, the meeting place of heaven and earth where we can see the salvation of the Lord at work.

In Luke's Gospel we're told that at the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain in the temple hiding the holy of holies was torn in two, allowing the fullness of God to flood the earth. The fullness of God is another way of saying the Kingdom of God restoring the creation by redeeming the creation through Christ.

The season of Lent is about to begin. We are given these forty days to pray, meditate, love one another and serve one another. Doing any of these things is an act of faith.

Living by faith, as if the kingdom of heaven is already here, may seem a hard assignment until we remember Jesus who died for us, reigns in power for us and prays for us. By remembering Jesus, we can follow him with the trust of a herd of sheep following their shepherd. The green pastures, the still waters, even the valley of the shadow of death are subject to his rule, because the kingdom of God is all around and within us through Christ who strengthens us.

The voice from the bright cloud said to Peter James and John, “This is my beloved son, listen to him.”

The only reason why would we know the story of the Transfiguration is because Peter James and John listened to him.

Maybe not at first, they still argued with each other about who was the greatest in God kingdom. On Good Friday they deserted Jesus when he needed the most, and Peter added insult to injury by denying Jesus three times. But despite their failures, through grace and forgiveness, Peter James and John finally listened to Jesus and gave their lives for him.

This year now more than ever, lets you and I recommit ourselves to going through the next forty days waiting for the reality of God’s kingdom to break through so we can progress in our transformation into human beings who are fully human. Claiming our new humanity, we can finally find our purpose as citizens of the kingdom: transforming the world, one life at a time as agents of grace and love in a world needing both.