

# *Revelation Overdose*

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## **Transfiguration Sunday**

Matthew 17:1-9

*“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.”*

A local community heard that Jesus was coming over to worship in one of their churches. Naturally, all of the clergy were very excited about this idea, and each church did all that they could to be ready. The Baptist Church prepared its choir to sing four rousing spirituals, and the pastor prepared one of his best hour-long sermons. At the Presbyterian Church, the organist, choir, and orchestra planned a full cantata for the service, complete with all the stops and all the strings. The members of the Methodist church cleaned their building until it shined, and stood in front of it, with smiling faces, gleaming teeth, and an open hand to greet Christ. The Episcopalians changed around the church calendar so they could make that day a High Holy Day; they wore their best vestments, and used their best silver in the following fellowship hour. Everybody was ready, excited, and sure that Jesus would come to their service. Nine o'clock – nothing. Ten o'clock – nothing. Eleven o'clock – nothing. Eleven thirty and all felt that it was best to go ahead and have their services anyway. Everyone at all the churches said it was a nice service, everyone said that all the effort was worth it despite Christ's absence, but everyone was a little disappointed that Jesus never showed up.

The following Monday, at a local clergy meeting, the pastors were comparing notes of preparation, pride of presentation, and points of discouragement. They were all so sure that Jesus was going to show up at their worship, and they were very disappointed that he didn't appear in anyone's church. In the midst of the wallowing and lamenting, the local rabbi wandered into the meeting with a big grin on his face. “You know,” he said, “we had the most interesting person in worship the other day.”

We all want to know who Jesus is. We all want to know the truth about Jesus, but we often miss the mark in understanding and knowing the person and the divine nature of our Lord. We project, we assume, and we conjecture, but we never seem to really know and understand this Jesus. There are movements in the academy like the Historical Jesus Seminar, trying to claim what it was that Jesus really said, so we can know who Jesus really was; casting lots to discern the discrepancies of evidences. Movies such as, *King of Kings*, *Jesus*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The Passion* are made to teach and show us the real Jesus in ways, which the Gospel cannot. In this day and age, a movie holds much more truth than a book, so we look past the scriptural inaccuracies, the historical inaccuracies, and the cultural assumptions in hopes that the movie can show us who Jesus really was and is. The Pharisees, the crowds, the disciples, even John the Baptist all wanted to know who Jesus really was, and are found asking him again and again to describe himself. Our pictures in our Christian culture depict a strong man, a kind to children man, a blond hair and blue-eyed man, a compassionate man, a longhaired and bearded man, and a man we have come to expect to see on every church parlor wall. But is this who Jesus really was and is? Like a curious crowd of onlookers, through the centuries, we circle around this figure of Jesus, from a safe distance, and slowly, slowly gather closer in hopes that we may see and touch and know who this man, this God may truly be. We bring our projections, we bring our expectations, and we bring our molds into which we want Jesus to fit. The ministers in the story I told all expected that Jesus wanted a large service with bells, whistles, and an hour-long sermon. They presumed to “know” what Jesus truly wanted, but all those who presume to “know” the real Jesus carry with them their own expectations, projections and assumptions. The nineteenth century Catholic scholar, George Tyrrell critiqued the modern historical movement when he said, “The Christ that [the scholars] sees, looking back through

nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” We look at Christ and see what we want to see. We all want to know who Jesus really is, but are we ready to hear it and allow our assumptions, projections, and expectations to be shattered? Do you really want to know who Jesus is?

Because when we see the true essence of Jesus, it overwhelms us. When we have the rare and powerful experience to know Jesus for who he is, character and essence, it will be more than we can bear. In the scriptures we are given tastes, we are given glimpses of this Jesus. We are shown portions, slivers of the light – but to truly see Jesus would be to look directly into the light, and our eyes would be blinded.

But that is where we are today.

Today we have climbed up the mountain, we have gone to the holy place where people go to experience and be transformed by God. Like Moses on Sinai, we have ascended and now we look at Jesus. Ah, it is bright, it is blinding, and it seems to be too much to bear. We have experiences of this before: the burning bush, the road to Damascus with Paul and others. Think of the creation – the void, the darkness, and then the light. What must that have been like; how might have the light pierced through the darkness into the heavens? The beginning of the piece, *The Creation* by Haydn is an excellent musical depiction of this experience. There is stillness, quiet, and hints of sound. And then, in a fast rush, the noise, the brilliance overtakes all of us and leaves us momentarily deaf to the world. *Play the beginning of the Creation here* It is a different scene with slightly different characters, but the power of the revelation, the brilliance of the light of God is the same. This revelation, this epiphany; this Christophany is what we are experiencing today. This is the experience on the mountain; this is the experience of seeing Jesus for who he is, his true essence is shown for all to see, that this is the divine. Here we see what the theologian Karl Barth claims about revelation, God showing God’s self to humanity in a full, uninhibited way. Like a bright light showing shining directly into us, changing us, challenging us, and depicting us for all that we are, and all that God is, the light of Jesus now shines before us.

Maybe you have experienced this before. Maybe you have had that powerful point of conversion, point of intervention when Christ comes into your life and reveals to you the truth, as you have never witnessed it before. Was it in prayer, was it while walking, and was it when you did not expect it? Did the tears fall down your face as well, and were you also overcome by the power of the Spirit, by the pure presence of Christ? For that is what the world is asking for in this search for Jesus – the pure, powerful, truth of the divine in the presence of humanity. Be careful what you ask for; be careful what you pray for! Do you really want to know who Jesus is, then look at the light, look at the purity, the power, and the essence of Jesus on the mountaintop? It is too much, it is more than we can handle, yet it is the revelation before us. There, with the prophets, with the law, is Jesus the Son of God, the incarnate one. Ah we desire to look, but the true essence of Christ overwhelms us and strikes us down.

And here we are, with the disciples, our mouths open, our speech lost in the sight of such a powerful revelation. What do we do, what do we say? Do we voice with Peter the searching thoughtless words of control? Do we try to regain our footing, do we try to find some solid ground with the words of Peter. Put it in a box, keep it sterile, and capture the moment so that we will never forget what we are seeing here. Take out your digital cameras, your phone cameras, your sketchpads, and recorders so that we can immortalize this experience in history. Lets build an alter, a memorial, a shrine so we can come back here again and again and remember the past, nay, re-live the past. Isn’t that what Peter is suggesting? Peter is claiming that this moment, so holy, so powerful, must be protected and controlled for the rest of humanity. We do the same with our churches, with our relics, our shrines and holy spaces. We are like a moth looking at a flame, drawn to it, but wanting to preserve the beauty of the flame forever. We do everything we can to control and sterilize the moment.

Some skeptics would claim that this is the purpose of churches. Organizations meant to control and force the revelation of God to the people. In 1801 there was an amazing revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky. People were moved and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Individuals had visions, groups of people were brought together by the Holy Spirit, and it was seen by many as spontaneous, free, and uncontrolled. These revivals continued, but the spontaneity waned. By the 1830s the great preacher and teacher, Charles Finney, had the revival down to a formula so that the experience could be controlled and forced, and success of spiritual fervor was guaranteed.

Perhaps our own churches are guilty of forcing and controlling the movement of Christ. But can you

blame us. We have seen the true nature of Christ, when the light has struck us, and we are afraid of that freedom and lack of control. This is a human reaction, it is the human condition because in the end we are scared, lost, and don't know how to react in the light of revelation. As the great Saint Augustine once said, when we are talking about spiritual matters, we don't know what we are talking about, because we are talking about God. But we want firm ground, we want to know and control and feel safe so don't we find ourselves with Peter voicing the thoughtless words, in hopes of containing the experience?

But before we go to far with our pride and hubris, God sets us straight; God points us in the right direction. In essence, God reaches down and gives us a "dope slap" to set us straight, to keep us focused on what is important. How often are we given such a gift in a revelation? How often is the revelation explained to us, so that there is no misunderstanding, no misinterpretation, or no misjudging? Oh we have our epiphanies in hindsight, but God doesn't want to wait. "Who is this Jesus," we cry, and we see and hear the answer. This must then be important, if we have so much assurance. This must be important if the joke is explained. In Flannery O'Connor's short story *Revelation* the main character, Mrs. Turpin is given a revelation of a girl throwing a book at her, lunging at her throat, and calling Mrs. Turpin a warthog. It is a powerful revelation with words, actions, and imagery, yet Mrs. Turpin still doesn't get it. She is angry, she is denying the revelation, and she is trying to control the message. Yet in the midst of her anger, while wallowing and washing her own hogs, Mrs. Turpin is given another Revelation of the Kingdom of God with the least in the front and those with societal standing in the back. Her revelation is explained because it is that important for her at that time. And as we stutter and stumble in attempts to explain away this revelation of Jesus as the Christ, God comes into our life, and sets us straight, keeps us focused, and explains what it is we are experiencing.

So let's listen to the word of God. We see the light. We hear the words. This is a multi-media revelation; this is a moment that takes all of our senses. What is it that God says to us? "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" There is so much in this message. There is so much in this revelation that we can take months to let it settle and change us. But let's look at our original question on the nature of Jesus. God is directing us to who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God, the one whom God favors. In Jesus the prophets and the law reach their fulfillment to excess. In Jesus God is revealed to excess. But we aren't exhorted to worship; we are called to praise; but listen. Listen to the words that Jesus has spoken thus far. Listen to the words that Jesus is speaking, and continue to listen as you walk with Jesus. Six days ago in the scripture, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus foretold his death and Peter denied it. Listen to Jesus. Earlier Jesus called the people to love their neighbors as themselves. Listen to Jesus. From here Jesus will begin the walk to the cross and portray the love that God has for humanity. Listen to Jesus! Do you see what we are to do with this revelation? We are to follow Jesus, we are to continue to walk with Jesus, and we are to listen to Jesus. This means that we are not to set up tabernacles honoring past events, but communities, which walk with Christ. We are not to create altars capturing the power of the Spirit, but churches, which serve the world with Christ. We are not to create holy spaces reliving the revelation, but we are to be holy people calling the world to the kingdom of God as Christ proclaims it. The Baptist theologian James McClendon claims that the Christian life does not begin with learning doctrine, dogmas or theological tenets. Instead the Christian life begins with action and witness. How do we listen, by walking with Christ as a people? As individuals? As a church?

This week starts Lent. This week starts the long journey of suffering, of penance, and of sacrifice and crucifixion. We need this revelation. We need this exhortation reminding us who Jesus is, calling us to what Jesus is doing, and giving us the courage to listen to Jesus. Take it in; soak it in – the presence of Christ, for there is a difficult road ahead of us. Feel Christ's full glory shining upon you, filling you with grace, for you will need every last bit. And then, feel the hand of Christ light upon your head, calling you up and urging you down the mountain to the cross.

Oh will you look at the revelation and see Jesus for who he truly is – the Son of God? Will you have the courage to allow yourself to be overwhelmed and overtaken by the power of the Holy Spirit in this revelation? Will you call the grace of God to overflow in your life? For then you will be ready for the walk to the garden, to the next mount of skulls, and to the tomb. Then you will be ready to truly listen to Christ calling you to the cross, whispering forgiveness in your ear, and demanding discipleship and your life. Who is this Jesus? This is God's son, the Beloved, the one who pleases God – listen to him!

AMEN