

To God Alone Be The Glory

I love Transfiguration Sunday. It's a Sunday for two hands. Do you understand what I mean? It's a day for saying, "On the one hand....," and "On the other hand"—a day for two hands. On the one hand God peels back the cover that hides his glory and shows us what he's about. On the other hand God shrouds himself so that our human eyes aren't allowed as much of a glimpse of God as we would like. The transfiguration of Jesus hides God even as it reveals God. So this day full of glory is also a day full of mystery. I tried to capture some of that mystery in the riddle that serves as the sermon theme. **THE SECOND MOUNTAIN IS BETTER BECAUSE OF THE THIRD HILL.**

To make things more mysterious for Transfiguration Sunday, our Old Testament lesson doesn't seem to present us much of a story to work with. If you were directing a movie about this incident, how would you convey the event? God tells Moses to come up the mountain and he'll give Moses the stone tablets. Okay, we could depict that. So Moses goes up, and a cloud representing God' glory settles down on the mountain top. Moses apparently waits at the edge of the cloud for six days before the Lord speaks to him (see vv 16 and 18). Imagine waiting for six days! Picture yourself at an office of the MN

Driver and Vehicle Services. You're the only one in line—there's no one waiting behind you. And it takes six days! Moses, of course, is not at the DVS. Yet the one who invited him up for a talk is silent for six days! Does this seem like an exercise in patience? We don't hear Moses complaining. Was he awestruck? Can you picture this 80-year-old man looking into the cloud trying to see the Lord, trying to see something in there, anything?

After six days the Lord invites Moses into the cloud. Can you imagine Moses looking around in the cloud with amazement saying, "Awesome! How am I going to describe this for the folks waiting down the mountain?"

Apparently he couldn't. We have no record of what Moses saw inside the cloud. Apparently that's the point: God wants to remain hidden even as he reveals some of his glory. For this reason, if you were making a movie of this event, I'm sure even the best special effects studio would be able to convey only a fraction of the gloriousness of God's glory. See what I mean?

Today is a two-handed day. On the one hand God reveals his glory, and on the other hand he keeps it hidden. I guess we'll just have to be content with our imagination until we get to see God's glory for ourselves when the Lord Jesus takes us believers home to heaven. I can hardly wait!

In the meantime, I hope you have figured out that Mt Sinai is the first mountain of the two I'm talking about when I say: **THE SECOND MOUNTAIN IS BETTER BECAUSE OF THE THIRD HILL.** I don't mean to communicate that the first mountain is bad or deficient in some way. The first mountain is glorious. God's glory on Mt Sinai was so glorious it couldn't be described any better than as 'a cloud' from the inside and as 'a consuming fire on top the mountain' from down below where the children of Israel were encamped.

Oh, that was a glorious day! The holy Lord was making a glorious covenant with his sinful people Israel! This seems to be one reason God waited until the seventh day before calling Moses into the cloud. Seven is three plus four. Get it? Three is God's number, as in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Four is the number for humans, as in North, South, East, West. When God brings man (4) into a covenant with him (3), he likes to picture it in the Bible in terms of seven (7).

When the Lord called Moses up into the cloud on the first mountain, he was giving Israel holy instructions. That's especially what made it a glorious day. You could even say Moses was receiving God's message. We're used to calling it God's Word. And what do believers do with God's Word? We listen to it, we read it, we trust it, we pattern our

lives after it, we consider it a more important message than any other. So the first mountain says, "Listen to the Lord." What a fitting message for Transfiguration Sunday!

The second mountain says the same thing: "Listen to the Lord." You heard about the second mountain in today's Gospel. Jesus goes up a high mountain. Peter, James, and John go with him. When they get to the top, the three disciples take a nap. But Jesus prays. The time for his suffering and death is coming near. It will be difficult. Well... that's an understatement. It will be horrible! That time you took what didn't belong to you... That time you got angry with God or lost faith in him because he wasn't giving you what you wanted fast enough... That grudge you held for so long until recently... All the times you and I stepped over one of God's boundaries... Soon Jesus will present himself before the heavenly Father and say, "I take full responsibility for all their evil. Punish me instead, Father." It doesn't sound pretty, does it? But it results in you and me being free from the punishment we deserve as sinners. And when, by the Holy Spirit's work, we believe this to be true, we enter a life of listening to the Lord, a life of serving God and our fellowman, a life of trying to shine forth with the glory of God as his ambassadors in all we say and do.

It is a glorious thing Jesus is about to accomplish for us—saving sinners from hell. Jesus is apparently praying about all this on top the second mountain. And apparently his glory as true God, which he had set aside before his conception inside Mary, now begins to peak out. His face changes. It shines like the sun. Even his earthly clothing become white like light.

And who should appear just then but Moses and Elijah, *“talking with Jesus. They [speak] about his departure, which he [is] about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem”* (Luke 9:31).

Why is Moses on the second mountain? At least in part because the Lord called him up the first mountain, and there revealed his glory to him, and gave him instructions for the people to listen to. Transfiguration Sunday is about listening to God’s Word.

And why is Elijah on the second mountain? At least in part because the Lord revealed his glory to Elijah (see 1 Kings 18). Remember how fire fell from the sky and burned up the sacrifice Elijah presented? And the people shouted, *“The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!”* God wanted the people to listen to the Word of the Lord through Elijah. Transfiguration Sunday is about listening to God’s Word.

Apparently Peter, James, and John don’t get to gaze at God’s glory for long. It’s a two-handed day for them too. On the one hand Jesus reveals his glory to them. On the other hand a cloud moves in and hides Jesus’ glory from them. But this is no ordinary cloud. It hides God’s glory and reveals God’s glory at the same time. The cloud hides Jesus’ glory from the disciples’ eyes, but their ears hear the Father talking to them. How glorious to hear God’s Word—like we get to do every time we come into God’s house and every time we open our Bibles at home! The hidden Father reveals from inside the cloud, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”* (Matthew 17:5). How glorious! As glorious as the first mountain—Mt Sinai—was when God gave Israel the law, so much more glorious is the second mountain—the mount of transfiguration—because here the gospel is proclaimed! But in order to understand this good news, we need to go climb the third hill with Jesus, the hill called Calvary. There he will present himself as our Substitute. He will die on the cross in our place. On the third hill all our sins will be paid for. How glorious for all sinners, especially those who believe this good news and through faith gain the benefits of Jesus’ work!

Now leave the third hill with me, leap up into the air and fly back to the second mountain—the mount of transfiguration. Here we go. Remember how the Father said, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased*”? Think about that. If Jesus is our Substitute—and he is—then the Father might as well be talking about us—and he is! He is saying, “You are all my sons and daughters, whom I love. With you I am well pleased because of my Son Jesus, your Substitute. He took your sins, and I give you credit for the holy life he lived. So I count you all not-guilty.” Do you see why I say **THE SECOND MOUNTAIN IS BETTER BECAUSE OF THE THIRD HILL?**

Transfiguration Sunday is all about listening to God’s Word and believing it to be God’s honest truth.

Now leave the second mountain with me, leap up into the air and fly back to the first mountain—Mt Sinai. Here we go. Moses *stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights*. Forty is another significant number in the Bible. Every time the number 40 comes up in the Bible, it is a time of testing, a time for strengthening faith in the Lord. In today’s text you have Israel being tested for 40 days, waiting for Moses to come back down from Mt Sinai. They won’t pass the test. Before the end of the 40 days they will

ask Aaron to make them a new god to worship, the golden calf. Later Israel will wander in the desert for 40 years while God raises up another generation of Israelites, people who *will* trust him and not grumble and complain and rebel whenever the going gets tough. Still later Jesus will fast for 40 days in the desert as he grows in his reliance on his heavenly Father. Is it any wonder that when the church decided to observe a period of repentance before celebrating the resurrection of our Redeemer that they chose a period of 40 days? That’s how the Lenten season began. While we aren’t required to celebrate 40 days of repentance, Lent sure can be a wonderful time to concentrate on overcoming a particular sin we need to struggle with. Because we’ve been up the first mountain and the second mountain and the third hill together this morning, will you take the next three days to think about what sin you will work against during this year’s season of Lent? You are already forgiven for whatever sin or temptation you choose to fight against. So why not try, with God’s help, during Lent to stop repeating it? This is the natural next step after listening to God’s Word and believing it. Put it into practice in your life. Jesus’ transfiguration shows God’s glory. If God helps you change, your transfiguration will show God’s glory too.