



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

MOUNTAIN VIEW

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When J.E. Standley was nine years old, he won a prize from his teacher for having the neatest desk in the class. She gave him a book on the wonders of the natural world, and it captured his imagination. Standley began collecting his own artifacts -- arrow heads, rocks, and anything unusual he could get his hands on. He kept up his collection into adulthood, and eventually opened Ye Olde Curiosity Shop on the waterfront in Seattle.

If you've never been there, you are missing out on one of the most uniquely Seattle experiences you can have. There is no place in the world quite like it. I remember going there as a kid and being absolutely fascinated and slightly creeped out by things like Sylvester the mummy, the shrunken heads from the Amazon, man eating clams and all the unusual pictures and bones and coins and totem poles that were everywhere. There's no rhyme or reason to things -- you have cheap trinkets sharing space with one of a kind artifacts. Spoofs and real mysteries all jumbled together. It's sensory overload. I remember for a souvenir I bought piece of paper called the Lincoln/Kennedy conspiracy, and it highlighted all the "coincidental" links between the two presidents' deaths. Like that Lincoln was shot in a theater named Ford and Kennedy was shot in a car made by Ford. My view of history has been skewed ever since.

But J.E. Standley had more in mind than just a tourist attraction. Kate Duncan wrote a history of the Curiosity Shop, and in researching the place, she was shocked to discover that many museums around the world have gotten their Native American art through the Curiosity Shop. Standley was an incredible enthusiast for the work of local tribes and a legitimate professional, and he was constantly buying up collections and sharing them with the world. There are pieces in the Smithsonian and in museums in London, Toronto and other major cities that came directly through the shop. What most of us think of as just a strange Seattle attraction has actually served a much more significant role in preserving the history of Northwest heritage.

We're getting close to wrapping up our time with Matthew. Over the last few months we've been looking at the lives of people impacted by Christ during his earthly ministry, and this morning, we come to one of the strangest, most curious incidents in the Bible. It has fascinated me for years, and I am excited every time I get to talk about it, because it's such an unusual event. But I mostly like talking about it because it is far more significant than it initially seems.

I'm talking about the story known as the transfiguration of Jesus. Let's take a look.

Matthew 17:1-8

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters -- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

When I worked at the ad agency, one of my clients was Technical Glass Products – a company based in Kirkland that distributes specialty glass products for use in commercial buildings. One of their manufacturers out of Japan was in a big push to introduce new products to the market, and shortly before I switched careers, they asked us to help them with a new product called Veluna.

Veluna is a type of glass brick that had a greenish-yellow hue to it, but when you turned off the lights, it glowed a fluorescent blue. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. To this day, I haven't seen any product like it on the market. But maybe the reason for that is because there IS no market for it. Everybody thought it was cool technology, but nobody could figure out why you would ever spend the money on it. There is a reason necessity should be the mother of invention, because then you have a built-in purpose for whatever you come up with. But what's the good of glow-in-the-dark bricks?

What's the good of a glow-in-the-dark Jesus? What's the good of seeing this magical moment where his appearance changed? The transfiguration story is pretty incredible to think about, but at first glance, it's a little hard to figure out what it has to do with us.

Now for those of you who are like me and like to approach things in chronological sequence, we're a little bit out of order this morning, because we're talking about something that happened before Easter, before the crucifixion and even before Palm Sunday. We're rewinding to an event that took place before the events we talked about the last two weeks.

But in this particular case, going out of order kind of makes sense, because it highlights the fact that the transfiguration seemed to happen out of order as well. Seeing Jesus in all his glory sounds like something we would expect the disciples to do after his resurrection – not before.

As long as we're already going out of order, let's back up even a little bit more. Because if we're going to understand why the transfiguration took place when it did, we need a bit of background. One week prior to this mountaintop experience, Jesus and his disciples were in the town of Caesarea Philippi. While they were there, Jesus had asked his them that important question: Who do you say that I am?

Peter gets the credit for coming up with the answer: You're the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Finally – the disciples are beginning to grasp Jesus' true identity. It's a spiritual breakthrough

Jesus tells Peter, "I'm going to call you The Rock, because you've hit the rock that I'm going to build my church on, and nothing's going to stop it."

It's a powerful moment of truth and clarity. And then Jesus begins explaining to them what it really means for him to be the Christ – that he's going to suffer and die. He's going to be betrayed. And Peter will have none of that. Now that he's seen who Jesus is, he has a strong urge to protect him.

Matthew 16:22-23

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

That's got to sting. If I were Peter, I would be saying, "Remember when you called me The Rock, Lord? Remember when I said that really good thing? Can we go back to that part?"

But Jesus doesn't go back – he presses forward:

Matthew 16:24-25

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

It's one thing for Jesus to talk about his own imminent death. That's hard enough to swallow. Now he's saying the ones who choose to follow him are also going to have to die in some way. It's a sobering message.

This is the hard message ringing in the ears of the disciples when Jesus grabs Peter, James and John and takes them to the mountain. And I think it tells us exactly why Jesus timed things the way he did.

Antonio Colangeli's son Giulio was one of the students in the buildings toppled by the recent earthquake in Italy. Antonio rushed to the scene, not having any idea where to look or what to do to try and find his son. He followed a rescue worker around the debris, just calling out "Giulio! Giulio!" There was a sense of futility and hopelessness in the face of the enormous devastation.

Then he heard a faint voice. "Papa, I'm here. I can't breathe." A reporter happened to snap this photograph right at the moment he was hearing his son's voice. Suddenly his search took on a new tone of hope, because he knew what he had heard. He knew his son was alive, because he had heard his voice for himself. It was the unmistakable proof of life that kept him going until his son was safely returned to him.

What helps you keep going when things get rough? How do you keep believing when the situation starts to look hopeless? The secret lies in what you know to be true. Jesus knew that these disciples needed "proof of life" – something solid that would be etched so deeply in their memories that it would sustain them far into the future. Because the most difficult days for them were yet to come.

The transfiguration did that. It was that glimpse of glory for the road. Nobody could take away that experience, and it gave them the resolve to keep going. Years later, toward the end of his life, Peter would reflect back on that day in one of his letters:

2 Peter 1:16-19

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Christ has still not returned, which means there are more difficult days ahead for us. We need something equally sure and big to give us the resolve to press forward in the faith. Most likely, we will not be blessed with the same kind of experience Peter had. Only three people got to be there that day, and it's never happened since. So we can't expect to recreate the same thing for ourselves. BUT -- we can still gain a mountain view of Jesus.

More often than not, Christ's way of helping us when we face tough times is not to take us out of the situation, but to give us a bigger vision of himself. And even though it may not look like the transfiguration, the transfiguration helps us understand what we need to expand our view of Christ.

To begin with, the transfiguration says

I need a Jesus who's not like me.

I think I've shared with you before the dream I once had about meeting Jesus. It was a different quality of dream than I can ever remember having, more vivid and emotional for me than normal. It was outside at some place like an airport, and there was a small crowd around this man who was walking along and talking. I don't know how I knew it was Jesus, because he was dressed in street clothes and didn't look anything like the Bible pictures. And that was what I couldn't get over: how ordinary he was, how much like the rest of us. I've known that in theory my whole life, but this dream just made me realize how little the reality had sunk in. It is such a miracle that God became human and was so accessible.

I don't want to take away from that truth one bit, because I need a Jesus I can relate to and who knows what it's like to be me. But you know what? Sometimes what we need most is a Jesus who is absolutely nothing like us.

The disciples had been hanging out with Jesus for three years. They respected him and deferred to him, but they also had a certain familiarity in their relationship where they saw themselves as "Team Jesus." That's why Peter had no qualms getting in Jesus' face and confronting him. Don't talk like that Jesus. That's too much negativity. Peter crossed a line in the relationship. He needed a reminder that as much as Jesus was his friend, he was also still his Lord.

It's too easy to think and act like we're on Team Jesus, too – tight with our buddy and able to help him along. We think we speak for Jesus and maybe even expect special favors from him. That's when we need to head for the mountain.

Jesus takes his disciples on this hike to reveal to them a side they've never seen. They start hiking up the trail, staring at Jesus' back in front of them as they climb higher and higher. They start to near the summit and suddenly they notice that Jesus looks different. He begins to get brighter and brighter and brighter. Light is now pouring out of him that's so intense it looks pure white. Not just his clothes are radiating – his face and skin are too. Can you imagine watching as someone you thought was just another average human now blazing like the sun? It would be frightening and then glorious as you realize what it means. This is a peek into the throne room of heaven.

In Psalm 29, David said to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, and that's what the disciples are experiencing – the real beauty of Christ's holiness. What a life-changing moment of recognizing who they've been dealing with all this time. Up until now Jesus had been their teacher, their helper in times of trouble, and even their friend. He's still all that, but now they see he's so much more. He is the King of kings who rules the universe. His brightness brings them to a place of awe and amazement and humility. Worship instantly came alive to them.

Last week we had that beautiful tissue paper stained glass window up front here. Given that it was made of tissue paper, the lighting for it couldn't be too hot. So Peter strung Christmas lights up and down behind it.

I thought that was an ingenious solution, but given the light of the rest of the room, you couldn't tell much when they were on or off. But Peter said, "You should have seen it with daylight behind it when we were building it in the garage." He sent me this picture from the construction process and you can see what a difference the brighter light makes. Everything blazes and comes to life.

Sometimes we settle for a Christmas light Jesus, a subdued Jesus, when what we need is to know the daylight Jesus. We're too content with a small scale friend and helper God, but there is so much more to him. He shines – so brightly that everything else fades in comparison. This is the Jesus who holds the stars in his hand. This is the Jesus who sits on a throne that sends out peals of thunder and flashes of lightning. This is the Jesus who has a voice like a waterfall and eyes that burn like fire.

He not only shines in heaven – he shines on earth through his body, the church. Philippians says we, as Christians, shine like stars in the universe. We do! We provide mountain views of Jesus for each other. God was shining in the email I got from a brother in our church who is seeing major emotional healing in his life. God is shining in the grieving families I've been talking to who still have rock solid hope of heaven. God is shining in the couple who felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to reach out to a hurting family they didn't know and found the blessing was all theirs.

When we see these things happening, our hearts are drawn to worship of the God who is still doing mighty things that bring him glory. He is still on the throne, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I need a Jesus who isn't like me, who is way beyond me, more pure and more powerful, because that's who he really is. And that's the only kind of Jesus who makes a difference in our lives.

As the disciples were watching, two more people arrived on the scene.

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

It's interesting that those are the two men. You might have thought Adam would show up, or Abraham. Maybe even David, since he was described as a man after God's own heart. If you have to pick two famous Israelites, why Moses and Elijah?

Moses and Elijah were more than heroes of the faith – they were also symbols. Moses was considered the primary author of the first five books of the Bible. Those books were categorized as "The Law." Elijah was a prophet. He was the first in a long line of prophets for Israel. So together, these two men personify "The Law and the Prophets," which is a term you often hear Bible writers use to refer to Scripture as a whole.

In this scene that's going on, if you look at the direction of the dialog, it's Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus, not the other way around. He's in the middle of it all. What I take away from this is that **I need a Jesus at the center.**

For Peter James and John, Moses and Elijah represented the faith as they had grown up with it. The Law and the Prophets were everything. Now they're seeing these two icons give all their attention to Jesus. They had never seen Christ as being where the Law and the Prophets were looking toward, but now everything was rearranged in their thinking.

This was something Jesus brought home after the resurrection. When Jesus met up with the two disciples on the road, before they knew who he was, he started walking them through the Bible.

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

A few weeks ago, I quoted David Plotz, a Jewish author who had a Bible blog where he read through the Bible for the first time and wrote about his impressions. He decided to stop after just the Old Testament. It felt too un-Jewish to him to include the New Testament. But he ended up unsure of who this God was that the Bible was talking about.

I think that's because by leaving out the Jesus part of the story, he was trying to open a lock without the key. Without Jesus, the Old Testament is an unfulfilled promise. It's the story of a holy God and unholy people without discovering what bridged the gap. Without Jesus, it's hard to find more than laws in the Law or stern messages from God in the prophets.

But when you start looking for Jesus in Scripture, you find him all over the place. And you see God's grace in places you never recognized it before. And suddenly the whole sweep of history makes sense as you see God moving to rescue his people over and over, finally culminating with the sending of his Son.

Even Christians reading the New Testament can lose sight of Jesus. Sally Morgenthaler writes,

It is the ultimate irony that there is so little of Jesus Christ and the Gospel in evangelical worship today...Jesus' life, death and resurrection have become increasingly irrelevant to the evangelical experience. We sing, pray, perform and preach as if we were completely on our own after the moment of conversion.

What does she mean? I've heard sermons that were nothing but a long list of self-help tips. They were taken from the Bible, but where Jesus fit in was a mystery. I've seen books on discipleship that emphasized how important it was for us to live up to certain

standards, good standards you find in Scripture. But there was no reference to Christ's power that even makes that possible. So what's the difference, as long as it's from the Bible? When Christ isn't at the center, feelings of guilt, insecurity and comparison creep in. We start thinking of faith as being about how or what we're doing and the only way we can tell how we're doing is to compare ourselves to how everyone else is doing. And we will either end up feeling incredibly insecure or incredibly judgmental. And as we look at the to-do list, we will feel overwhelmed with guilt.

But Jesus is the one who makes us right with God. No matter how many verses we learn or how many rules we keep, the answer is still the same: Salvation is by grace. And the more we keep Jesus at the center of our faith, the more we will see his grace. The more we keep Jesus at the center, the more freedom we will find from the burden of guilt-driven religion. The more we keep Jesus at the center, the more our faith is about God and not about us.

You've got to love Peter's reaction as he watched Moses and Elijah and Jesus. "Let's build some tents!" Even Mark inserts the comment that Peter had no idea what he was saying. He was so caught up in the moment and he just wanted to do something in response.

But that lack of really understanding what was going on prompted God the Father to speak from the cloud.

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

It's as if God is grabbing Peter by the collar and saying, "Peter – LOOK! This is my Son. MY SON!! Stop for a minute and listen to what he's saying.

I need a Jesus I listen to.

Parents often talk about their kids having selective listening. Technically there is nothing wrong with their hearing. They raise the correct hand on all the little beeps for the hearing test. But as soon as you ask them to do something, they become deaf as a post. They can tune out what they don't want to hear.

I feel like I'm that way with Jesus. I don't mind listening when his words go along with what I want to do anyway, or when he has comforting things to tell me. But when it's something difficult or unexpected, I sometimes tune him out.

There were two things God wanted those first disciples to listen to that day. The first was

1. The cost of following

They had not wanted to hear what Christ was saying about his coming death. And they for sure hadn't wanted to hear the part about their own suffering. He was asking them to

pick up their own crosses and follow him. That's a difficult message for anyone to hear. And he's asking us to listen to that as well.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote,

The cross is laid on every Christian... Thus it begins: the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise God-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

As disciples down through the century have tried to wrap their minds around what it means to pick up your cross, it has taken many different forms, but it has always come down to the same thing: dying to self. For me, the easiest way to think of that in practical terms is to think of words that start with self. Self-centeredness. Self-importance. Self-hatred. Being self-conscious or self-absorbed.

Those are hard things to die to. Each of us has our own battle with one or the other of those. For Christ's first disciples, the choice was often very black and white and put them in danger of losing their physical lives as well. They were going to face enormous pressures in the initial years after Christ's return to heaven. The cost of following Jesus was going to be painfully real to them.

But that wasn't the only thing Jesus was saying that God wanted the disciples to hear that day. Take a look at the first words out of Christ's mouth after God said to listen.

When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid."

2. The confidence of following

What a tender picture – Jesus putting his hand on their shoulders and saying, “It's okay. You don't have to fear being in God's presence when you're with me.”

That's the heart of his message. Because of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of God. Even when we're full of misguided ideas like building three tents, we don't have to worry about God's opinion as long as we're with Christ. There's no more groveling like the cowardly lion – Jesus gives us the strength to get up and be fearless in the presence of the Almighty.

Hebrews 4:16

So let us come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive his mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need.

Do you get what an incredible privilege this is? The Almighty maker of heaven and earth, the God who is a holy, consuming fire now says we can walk **BOLDLY** into his presence with no fear. What an awesome message for God to want us to hear. Without that second message, the first message about the cost would be unbearable. The cost

would be too high. But since we have such great confidence, we can ask God for anything we're needing as we follow Jesus. And he has paid the cost for us.

I can picture the disciples huddled low to the ground, covering their heads with their hands as the voice roars down from the cloud. Then Jesus touches them. Slowly, they raise their heads and we come to one of my favorite lines:

When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

I love how that is worded. It doesn't say, "Moses and Elijah left" – although we assume they did. All it says is that the disciples now only saw Jesus.

I need a Jesus I can't quit looking at.

I believe this was the heart of Christ's reason for letting these friends see his transfiguration. He was grabbing their heart as he grabbed their eyes. He wanted to be the only one they were looking to for hope and guidance. He wanted to be their sole focus as they headed back down the mountain and into real life – a life that would throw everything in front of them to distract them.

What steals your focus? I find that I either fall into New Bike Rider syndrome or Red Riding Hood syndrome or New Bike Rider Syndrome.

Do you remember learning to ride a bike without training wheels? Keeping your balance is so tough. And when you're first getting the hang of it, you usually are concentrating so hard that you stare at the front wheel to try and make it go straight. And the harder you stare at it and try to keep it straight, the more wobbly it gets. You have to learn to pick your eyes up and look ahead instead of at the rock or pothole right in front of you.

For me, sometimes my biggest distractions come from focusing on my own problems and efforts. And the more attention I place on them, the more anxious I get. If I can lift my eyes back onto Christ, I gain perspective on my problems and they don't loom so large.

Psalm 34:4-5

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

With the Red Riding Hood syndrome, the distractions are different. If you remember that story, the wolf got Little Red Riding Hood distracted by looking at the pretty flowers along the path. That slowed her down enough so he could get to grandmother's house ahead of her. She lost sight of her ultimate goal because other things caught her eye and seemed sweeter in the moment.

There are a lot of shiny, sparkly distractions out there that can become my destination instead of Christ. A million attractions that are merely sideshows – and they can all stop us in our tracks. Opportunities to make ourselves look good. Temptations to escape the troubles of real life and spend all our time in a fantasy world. Chances to fill our emptiness with stuff. It's not always bad stuff – it's just distracting stuff.

John Eldredge once said, "If Christianity doesn't take your breath away, something else will." I want to look up and see only Jesus. That's what I want to have my eyes on. Just him. I want the kind of clarity that comes from a mountain view of him, a bigger vision of who he is that makes all the other distractions seem cheap and pale in comparison.

As you consider what your current view of Christ is, ask yourself:

Am I living with a Christmas light Jesus or a daylight Jesus?

What message am I having a hard time hearing him say?

Am I a Bike Rider or Red Riding Hood? A worrier or a wanderer? What pulls my focus off Christ? Let's hold out for a Christ who calls us to follow him up the mountain, a Christ who shines brighter than the sun, a Christ who stands alone in his awesome glory and invites us to stand there with him.