

1 Transfiguration – Matthew 17

The prophet Daniel had three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. You might recognize them by their Babylonian names, Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego. They refused to bow down to the image of gold set up by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. The king threatened to throw them into the burning, fiery furnace if they refused to bow down to his golden image. They responded by saying:

Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up. (Dan 3:17-18)

Nebuchadnezzar was furious when he heard this response from Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah. He commanded that the furnace be heated up seven times hotter than it normally was. It was so hot that when these friends of Daniel were thrown into the furnace, the men who opened the doors to toss them in died from the extreme heat coming out of it. The fire was so hot and bright that it was dangerous even to stand near the furnace. But then something happened. King Nebuchadnezzar got up in amazement. They had thrown three men into the fiery furnace, but now he saw four men walking around unscathed. And this is the most remarkable thing. Nebuchadnezzar said that the fourth man's form was like the Son of God. He then opened the door and called to the three young men to come out. They came out completely unharmed. Not even the hair on their head was burned.

When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the flames, which were seven times bigger than before, not only could he see these three young men walking around, not only could he see a fourth man walking around with them, but he could tell that this fourth man looked like the Son of God. The appearance of this fourth man stood out, outshining the great flames. He clearly saw the Son of God in that furnace. He saw the Angel of the LORD, the second person of the Holy Trinity, true God from eternity. He saw someone whose form was so bright, so unmistakable, that he couldn't help but confess that his form is like the Son of God. And when he brought the three young men out of the furnace, he was persuaded by their great confession. He declared that these young men were willing to give up their own bodies to the flames and defy the king's words if only they would continue to serve the one true God.

The Son of God reveals himself in the middle of the fire, in the middle of a fierce and literally burning trial. The Son of God didn't come to earth only to show that he is the Son of God. He came to earth to save sinners from the unquenchable flames of hell. He came to bear the fire of God's wrath in the place of all sinners. He came to suffer, and through his suffering, he not only made full satisfaction for our sins, but he is also able to sympathize with our suffering, to meet us in our darkest hour, and to protect us from the fiercest and hottest temptations. As he says through the prophet Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name;
You are Mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.

2 Transfiguration – Matthew 17

When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
Nor shall the flame scorch you.
For I am the LORD your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Is 43:1-3)

What Nebuchadnezzar saw in that fiery furnace was unmistakable. And it will be unmistakable when the Son of God returns in his glory. Every knee will bend. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord in the glory of God the Father. When people see his true form shining through brighter than any light, then there will be no mistaking it.

And yet, this magnificent Son of the Father, eternal God over all, does not show his glory apart from his cross. Not long before he took Peter, James, and John onto a high mountain to show them the full form of his glory, Jesus was telling his disciples that he was going to be handed over to be crucified, to suffer and die, and on the third day rise again. His glory is not without his cross. In fact, when he stood there, shining like the sun, talking with two of his great prophets, Moses and Elijah, he was talking to them about this very thing. Luke records that they were talking about his departure from this world. This would include his betrayal, his imprisonment, his trial, his suffering, his crucifixion, and his death. He who outshines the brightest flames would not spare himself of the fiery trial of the cross. So when he was coming down the mountain with his three disciples, he commanded them not to tell anyone what they saw until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

In Catechism class we have been talking about Jesus' state of humiliation and his state of exaltation. His state of humiliation is when Jesus hid the full form of his glory. He didn't always and in every way use his divine powers. He put himself under the law, becoming obedient all the way to death, even the death of a cross. Even though he had the true form and appearance of God, he humbled himself to take on the form of a servant. Jesus' state of humiliation lasted from his birth all the way to his death and burial. It was how he would earn salvation for poor sinners by taking their place under the law's judgment.

Jesus' exaltation is when he always and fully uses his divine powers. When he was buried, he declared his victory over the powers of hell. He was raised from the dead, and he ascended into heaven with all powers and dominions under his feet. He pleads for us at the right hand of the Father in his perfect glory.

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John to that mountain, he showed them what he looks like in his true, exalted form as God's eternal Son. He showed them what Nebuchadnezzar saw was overwhelming the great flames in the furnace. But this exalted form was to remain hidden until after he was raised from the dead. Until after he had humbled himself, obeyed what we fell short of obeying, and suffered the fate we all deserved, his bright and magnificent form was hidden under humility.

You see, God is not glorified simply by showing his glory in all its splendor. If this were the case, then it would have been enough for him to give his law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Or Jesus could have walked around shining more brightly than the face of Moses at the foot of the mountain. But God does not want to be glorified by simply showing what he looks like. No,

3 Transfiguration – Matthew 17

God is glorified by saving sinners from his fierce anger and the flames of hell. He is glorified when he takes our place in the fiery furnace of the cross, when he reconciles us poor sinners back to himself, and when he remains with us through every burning trial and temptation we must face in this life. This is the greater glory of God. In fact, this is the true face of God. This is what he truly looks like.

It wasn't enough for Nebuchadnezzar simply to see the Son of God in the furnace. He also needed to hear God's Word. He needed to hear from the three young men those words that made him so angry: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace." This confident and bold confession of salvation is none other than a confession of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who was coming into the world to save sinners. Even though these words at first made Nebuchadnezzar angry, they were key words for him to hear. In the end, this confession of the gospel changed Nebuchadnezzar's mind and caused him to confess that there is no other god who can deliver like this.

So in the same way, it wasn't enough for Peter, James, and John simply to see the Son of God in his full, majestic form. If all we ever did was look at Jesus, then we inevitably would be misled by our own pious sounding but wrong-headed ideas. This is what happened with Peter. He thought he could worship Jesus by building tents for him, Elijah, and Moses to live in. But Peter was missing the point. The Father's voice thundered from the bright cloud saying, "This is my Son whom I love and in whom I delight. Listen to him!" This is how God desired them to know his glory. This was how he wanted them to behold his face. It was by hearing his Word.

So after these three disciples fell on their faces at the sound of God's voice, they looked up and saw only the face of Jesus. They heard his gentle and comforting voice: "Get up, and don't be afraid." This is how God now desires to reveal his glory. It isn't in the terrifying cloud and thunder of the law. It is in the still and gentle voice of the gospel, which he revealed to Elijah so many years before this. Here is glory even greater than the glory of the law. It is the humble, meek, and kind voice of our Savior who came to bear our sins, to calm our fears, and to lift us up to stand with him at his Father's right hand.

Peter calls this the sure prophetic Word. He calls it light shining in the darkness. He calls it the Morning Star, which rises in our hearts. When we have this Word of our Savior, then we can look forward to seeing his full splendor without any fear of condemnation. As we sing with joy in the *Te Deum*, "We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge." We who know his glory under his suffering and dying in our place also take comfort in his Word of grace under the fiery afflictions and temptations of this life. We will look forward to his glorious face with joyful anticipation. Because he who will show his great and awesome face for all to see is the same kind Savior who dwells with us in his Word and sacraments, sheltering us from the burning attacks of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. To know his Word, to know his cross, is to know Christ. It is to know his resurrection. And as we cling to his precious gospel, we know his face even before we see it. When we finally do see what no eye can see, it will be a joy we can't yet express. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly! Amen.