

# What Changed?

A Homily Expositing Matthew 17:1-9

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What changed?

The word on those old manuscripts is the Greek word from which we get the English “metamorphosis” – a change that produces a maturation process. Most translators though have thought the meaning of the text was best conveyed with the seldom otherwise used English word, “transfiguration” – a change into something more beautiful or elevated. So what changed in the story that we call the transfiguration of Jesus?

It may very well be the most enigmatic part of the gospel story when Jesus led Peter, James, and John up onto a mountain where he convened with Moses and Elijah and where his clothes suddenly became dazzling white and his face radiated like the sun. Most of the other significant moments in the life of Jesus are expressive of some theology of import – the birth of Jesus tells us of the incarnation; Jesus coming from the tomb tells us that God is a God of resurrection; even the odd story of the ascension of Jesus tells us that we are God’s hands and feet – but what on earth does the transfiguration tell us? Well, it’s a transfiguration so it has to have something to do with change, but what changed?

We would think that in a story that has, for centuries, been called the transfiguration *of Jesus* that it was Jesus who changed there on the mountain, and indeed it *was* he whose very physical appearance morphed. Writers contemporary to and just before Matthew’s time wrote of similar scenes when Emperors or important civic and political leaders beamed with light. In each case they were trying to say that the impacted person was descended directly from the gods and therefore divine. So was this the moment that Jesus was “adopted” by God? Was the transfiguration the moment when a man’s flesh became the incarnation of God?

Aside from his change in appearance, Jesus also met Moses and Elijah, representatives of both the law and the prophets who were said to have never died. Was Jesus receiving the wisdom of the ages? Was he becoming the bearer of tradition for a new age? Something about Jesus had to be changing there on that mountain. The voice of God from a cloud booms out, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” That confirms that something has just taken place doesn’t it – that Jesus has changed?

Well, maybe not. We’ve heard that phrase somewhere before. At the baptism of Jesus – a sort of inaugural event for his ministry – while he was coming up out of the water a voice echoed out from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.” Matthew has on the voice of God exactly the same phrase before Jesus’s ministry had even begun. The voice of God at the transfiguration isn’t marking a change, it’s reiterating a point. In fact, if we survey all of the events of the life of Jesus Matthew tells us of after that first voice from heaven and before the transfiguration and compare them to the events after the transfiguration and before those fateful events in Jerusalem at the end of the gospel we’re going to see a lot of the same kinds of things – not much changes. Jesus restored those whose lives were marginalized by some debilitating circumstance; hordes of people recognized Jesus taught with some kind of uncommon authority; he equipped and empowered followers to do the same work; he ruffled the feathers of the standard bearers of

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

tradition and empire. These things happened before *and* after the transfiguration – Jesus doesn't seem to have changed at all on that mountain.

But if Jesus didn't change, and it is a story about change, what changed? Could it be that the disciples changed at the transfiguration?

We could at least say with some certainty that the disciples would have need for growth and a need to gain perspective and a need to weigh priorities and anchor certain commitments before their coming days – they had need for change. If there is anything different about Matthew's story after the transfiguration compared to before it is that a theme already present begins to intensify after – that of Jesus's conflict with the authorities. In fact that was very much on the minds of the disciples *as they were on the mountain*. Just before their trek began Jesus told his disciples a confounding thing. He told them that the road they were on, that very conflict would end in his suffering and death.

That was quite outside the disciples' expectations I think. They had each chosen to follow Jesus believing their lives would have an impact on the betterment of life and society for a great many. After they had chosen to follow they began to see the true power of the one they followed to transform. Not only did he heal and teach and preach, he empowered them to do the same. Every village they came to was another opportunity to see redemption at hand. They would stick with Jesus and Jesus would show them an entire world made new. One day, they must've thought, this growing following of his would lead him – and them – right into the halls of power where their ability to do good would be amplified and *everything* would change for the better! These expectations would actually be fulfilled, but the ultimate mode of fulfillment, namely a cross for Jesus rather than a throne, was not part of their expectations.

There is little question they had great concern for their teacher and his wellbeing, but being human, they were also self-concerned. They had seen already some pushback in the times that Jesus had prioritized his healing work ahead of the traditions that held society in its bounds, but a little verbal sparring, nothing serious. Once when they were in Jesus's hometown the people were so untrusting that they simply couldn't do their work at all, but they just moved on to another place and resumed what they came to do. There was no real threat in it. Even if minor grievances escalated, by the time of the transfiguration the disciples had begun to think of Jesus as the expected one of Israel, the one who would bring justice and autonomy and prosperity back to them. If anyone dared stand against the Messiah, as Peter confessed Jesus to be, he would simply defeat them in whatever way was necessary. Until Jesus told them he would die I suspect they hadn't even considered the full cost of the world-saving venture they were on – not the cost for the one leading them, and not the cost to them individually.

As they ascended that mountain the disciples had a lot on their mind. Was it even true? Would the resistance to a new way forward that centered the marginalized, wrested power from the elite and brought up the lowly really be so strong that it could kill a man? Surely, it wouldn't get that serious – a little name calling here and there, a little shouting in the streets, but they would never face violence, right? Their livelihoods wouldn't be on the line, right? Their lives would be safe, right? This following Jesus thing may have just gotten more serious than they thought. By the time they reached the peak of the mountain I doubt they'd even had time to turn their attention to the "so what?" What if following Jesus had gotten more serious? What if it was going to require more of them than they'd already invested? What if their security and their reputation and their plans and their expectations in life and their hopes for what was to come were all required to be put on the line? What would they do? Could they go along? Or would that be the end of discipleship?

So, yes I think that the disciples could stand a bit of change there on that mountain – A change of mind perhaps? A change of attitude? A change of perspective? A reorientation of hope? – We could characterize it a thousand ways, but the fact is the disciples who were with Jesus were beginning to look into the realities of where they were headed and it isn't where they first thought they were going and getting there would mean change. In fact, I could say that the events there on the mountain set up the opportunity for their change.

Some commentators say that what happened there – the meeting with Moses and Elijah and Jesus glowing bright – signify the full revelation of who Jesus is in all his glory. That's why we read this story at the

culmination of the season of Epiphany. This is when we see Jesus fully revealed there on the mountain. I do think we see Jesus fully, but I'm not sure it's the glowing Jesus that reveals the real Jesus. To me it seems that's the Jesus the disciples had been expecting – high and lofted, in continuity with the traditions they'd been taught, radiant in splendor, divine, pure, set apart, glorious in victory. That's the Jesus they'd been waiting to see and when they did, Peter offered to build structures around that moment, around that Jesus to keep it holy for all time and Jesus declined his offer. Before they knew it that moment was over and Jesus was leading them back down the mountain where they would be right back into the thick of their work. I think *that* is the real Jesus – divine, yes; empowered of God, yes; in continuity with faith history, yes; but set apart, no – to know Jesus truly is to know the one who is constantly, tirelessly, sacrificially engaged with those who are hurting.

I think Jesus was revealed fully on the mountain, but was revealed maybe for the first time *by contrast* with the Jesus that lived in the minds of the disciples. So the disciples had room to change for sure. They had room to change their minds about Jesus. They had room to change their perspective about what kind of commitment they had made to him. They had room to change what they were hoping for – not positions of power in a new ruling order, but positions of sacrifice in service to others. They had room to change a lot. And they had an opportunity to change when their image of Jesus, their image of God and what God is doing in the world changed from a simple work of healing to the redemption of all the world at all cost. They had need for change and they had opportunity for change both on the day Jesus was transfigured before them, but the question remains – did the disciples of Jesus change? Well, did they?

Amen.