

Last Sunday After the Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
15 February 2026

Matthew 17:1-9

It is strange that last week we were at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, in Chapter 5:13-20, and this week we are all the way in Matthew 17:1-9. Why take a twelve-chapter jump? This has a logical explanation. The season of Ordinal/Ordinary time we call, "After Epiphany" always starts on January 6th with the Feast of the Epiphany, or the visit of the Maggi to the child's birthplace in Bethlehem, and it always ends with the feast of the Transfiguration, which we celebrate today. Which means that the season bridges the space between Christmas and Lent. The longest this season can ever be is 9 weeks, depending on when Easter falls on any given year. In 2026, the season was six weeks long, because we have an earlier Lent season and Easter.

During Epiphany Ordinary Time, God reveals the Messiah to the world in the Scriptures, growing our knowledge of Christ's identity and vocation a bit more every week. This revelation starts and ends with a heavenly voice that introduces God's Son to his disciples, the world of First Century Palestine, and to believers of every generation. The heavenly voice stated at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Mt 3:17). Today, at the mount of transfiguration, the same voice repeats that phrase for the benefit of Peter, James, and John, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Mt 17:5). This is exactly the same phrase as the proclamation at the baptism with one addition: The imperative statement, "Listen to him!"

We know that the first time we heard the heavenly voice Jesus was about to begin his ministry in Galilee. At the Transfiguration, this phrase marks the end of the Galilean ministry, as Jesus will now begin a slow march to Jerusalem, where he will be killed. In fact, in the Synoptics (Mark, Matthew, Luke) the Transfiguration always leads to one of Jesus' announcements about his death (Mk 9:30-32, Lk 9:43-45, Mt 17:22-23). In a very real way, for Jesus of Nazareth his Transfiguration marks the beginning of the end of his earthly ministry.

But, even at this event, at the end of the Galilean ministry, God pulls the sheet one last time, giving us a more detailed view of Christ's identity and vocation. And, both Israel and the Church, are represented in this scene. Like Moses at Mount Sinai, Jesus' face shines like the sun, and his clothes are dazzling white. Then Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets of Israel, are seen talking with him, one at his left and one at his right.

The fact that both characters disappeared after the Transfiguration shows those witnessing the event that Jesus is superior to both the Law and the Prophets.

But the Church is also powerfully represented in this scene. The terrified disciples who witness this event fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. It is to them that the heavenly voice commands, "Listen to him!" This will be the vocation of the Church from this day forward. They are to listen to him, which means that they are to do what he commands, they must be obedient to what they had heard from Jesus, but also to what they had witnessed in Jesus' presence. In a very real way, from today on, they must be witnesses of the Transfiguration to the very ends of the world. They must proclaim, as Peter does in 2 Peter 1:16-2, "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain." These disciples will forever be able to say, "We were there! We saw Moses and Elijah reverently speaking to him. We saw how Jesus represents the continuity between the old revelation and the age of the Church. He is the center! Everything points to him and becomes fulfilled in him. This man is God himself!"

Matthew has an affinity for Peter and treats him very well in his Gospel, and I love this. Let me give you just one example. In this account from Matthew, Peter exclaims, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But there is something different here. Right after this statement in Mark, we hear, "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified." In Luke, we hear, "Not realizing what he was saying". But Matthew does not present a babbling Peter who doesn't know what he is saying. Rather, his Peter is filled with holy emotion. Jesus moves directly from the heavenly voice's announcement to a gesture of comfort for his terrified disciples, "he touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

Being a witness to the Transfiguration, and later on to the Resurrection, is a terrifying business that will eventually lead all these disciples to incarceration and death. Perhaps, Peter becomes aware of this at that mount. Perhaps, he is beginning to see echoes of the end. Perhaps, this is why he wants to stay at the mount of transfiguration and he resists the idea of Jesus having to die. Life is better at that mountain. God's glory surrounds them and the brilliant light around Jesus speaks volumes about a God who is immanently near. Why would anyone want to go back to the valley, a place of darkness, confusion, suffering, illness, demonic forces, crime, inequality, division, and hopelessness. I would want to stay on that hill, too! Perhaps, Peter knows or suspects what's coming next!

But, as I have preached before on this passage, we cannot stay at the mountaintop. Life takes place on the valley, and the disciples will have to face the

demonic powers of the world, especially when their friend is taken away from them. They will have to stand for mercy and compassion in an intolerant world. They will have to speak for those without a voice. They will have to be Jesus' hands and feet in a world filled with poverty and despair. They will have to proclaim Jesus' words to generations to come, commanding the world to "Listen to him!" They will have to preach "by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ." This will be their vocation. I don't blame Peter for wanting to stay up at that mountain. Perhaps, Peter is more intuitive than we give him credit for.

Transfiguration gives a glimpse of the divine glory of Jesus in the same way that the Crucifixion gives us a full picture of his humanity. A commentator puts it,

"In the transfiguration, Jesus' clothes shine with the glory of God; at the crucifixion, the soldiers gamble over his garments. In the transfiguration, Jesus is surrounded by Moses and Elijah; at the cross by two criminals. In the transfiguration, Jesus is declared to be "God's Son" by the voice of God from the cloud; at the crucifixion the words "he said, 'I am God's Son'" become a taunt of mockery on the lips of the religious authorities. At the end of the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah have departed, leaving Jesus to stand in singular glory; at the end of the crucifixion, Jesus dies in humiliation while the crowd stands around waiting to see "whether Elijah will come to save him." In both events, three of Jesus' followers are specified as witnesses -- the transfiguration by Peter, James, and John, and the crucifixion by Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Solome, the mother of Zebedee's sons. The parallel's suggest that we are to read one story in the light of the other, anticipating in the shining splendor of the transfiguration the suffering by which this glory will be won and discerning in the shame of the cross the very glory of God. (Long, as quoted in <https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt17x1.htm>).

We are in need today to hear the same words of Jesus in this episode. "Get up and do not be afraid! Get up because the life of the church is taking place out there in the real world and we cannot stay in this sanctuary forever. Get up because this mountaintop experience we call 'Sunday church' will end within the hour, and you still have many hours of work in the fields before you rest. Get up because the darkness is advancing out there and the world is becoming more intolerant, more negative, and more divided. Get up because it is your job to be the light of the world, to stand up for the voiceless, to salt this country with a gospel of mercy and compassion. Get up! And do not be afraid. I am with you always.

May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!