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The Gospel According to Luke

XXXI. The Transfiguration

Luke 9:28-36

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Years ago, when such things were still popular, in those ancient times before Instagram and TikTok, I came across a blog written by Gordon Atkinson, the pastor of a small Baptist church in San Antonio. He entitled his blog, “Real Live Preacher” – that name indicating the real, and often very intense, spiritual honesty with which he wrote about his faith and the life of his congregation. One entry stayed with me – I printed it out as soon as I finished reading it. It was entitled, “*A Burning Bush Would Be Nice.*” Here’s the opening:

A burning bush would be nice. Moses got one, and he wasn’t even a nice guy. He was on the lam at the time, running from a murder rap back in Egypt. So why can’t a nice guy like me get a burning bush every once in awhile?

I want to see God and to know God’s presence. I want to see God in a clear, unambiguous way that cannot be misunderstood or misinterpreted. And there is something about the clarity that a God-fire in the wilderness provides. You see it. You smell it. You hear it. Yes, that is God. No doubt about it.

Only I’ve never seen a burning bush or anything remotely close to it. A well-played pipe organ gives me the shivers sometimes. The turning of the leaves in Colorado can make my lower lip tremble. When my nine-year old daughter walks down the hall . . . joy prickles my scalp . . .

In those small moments, God seems very real to me. It’s almost impossible to doubt His presence. But those moments pass, and soon my chin is in my palm again, and I am wondering why I can’t really see God.

I mean really, really see God.¹

Atkinson is in very good company as he expresses both that longing and that frustration. The Psalmist cries out to God, “*How long will you hide your face from me?*”² Job, in his agony, angrily accuses God: “*Why do you hide your face?*”³ Even the prophet Isaiah, in the midst of declaring the good news that God is bringing His people home from exile in Babylon, pauses for a moment in his exultation to declare, “*Truly you are a God who hides yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior.*”⁴ So, if ever you also have wondered why God does not more often make His presence plain – well, join the club.

Even the disciples had not truly seen God in the presence of Jesus. Last week, Peter confessed that Jesus was the promised Messiah.⁵ But confessing it by faith, and actually seeing it by sight, are not the same thing, even for Peter. I mean, Peter and the others had seen Jesus do a lot of God things – heal the sick, cast out demons, still the wind and waves, raise people from the dead. But He had done all this while still looking very much like nothing more than a human being. Jesus’ divinity – His glory as the only Son of the Most High God – had remained carefully concealed beneath the cloak of His humanity. They had seen Jesus in His humanity, but had not yet truly seen Jesus in His divinity.

Until the Transfiguration. Until that moment when Jesus led Peter and James and John up the mountain with Him to pray. The three disciples, of course, fell asleep during the praying – as the disciples seem often to have done. But they were awakened by the presence of a blinding light. And when their eyes were fully open, they saw that the light was coming from Jesus – that the Light, in a very real sense, was inside Jesus, was Jesus. For just a moment, they were permitted to peek beneath the veil of His humanity to see the truth and glory of His divinity. For just a moment, they saw Jesus for who He truly was. For just a moment, they saw clearly the glory of the Most High God shining forth from the face of their Teacher. For just a moment, they saw something even better than a burning bush – Moses was right there, along with Elijah – and they could have asked him, and Moses would have agreed.⁶ Better than a burning bush, because for just a moment they were seeing the burning holiness of God Himself – unveiled, revealed, made plain.

That sight stunned the disciples, overwhelmed their senses, their reason, their understanding. Peter just started babbling on about tents – but by the end all three disciples had fallen silent. An unforced, though necessary silence about what they were seeing, what they had seen, which would last for many years. I mean, how to put into words what it is like to see God, to see the glory of God, up close and personal? Until at last Peter would break that silence by finding a way to write about what they had seen in the second of his letters. He was writing about his certainty that Jesus would come again, and of the critical and urgent need for God’s people to be ready for His return – and, as proof, as evidence, Peter went back to that moment on the mountain where he had seen God’s glory. Seen God, face to face, in Jesus. And he writes:

We weren’t, you know, just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ. We were there for the preview! We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father as the voice of Majestic Glory spoke: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of all my delight.” We were there on the holy mountain with him. We heard the voice out of heaven with our very own ears.

We couldn’t be more sure of what we saw and heard – God’s glory, God’s voice. The prophetic word was confirmed to us. You’ll do well to keep focusing on it. It’s the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts.⁷

And in Peter's words, we witness Peter having at last come to grips with what that moment on the mountain meant to him, meant for him – and what it means to us and for us, as well. To see Jesus transfigured was for Peter, first of all, a complete confirmation of the confession he had made just a while earlier that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Most High God – that there just simply couldn't possibly be any doubt whatsoever after what he had seen. That sight of Jesus transfigured was for Peter like the ripping away of the veil that hides God's heaven from this earth. It was like, for the first time, really seeing reality – or really seeing the greater reality which exists within and beyond what we ordinarily think of as reality here in these earthly lives of ours.

And that sight of Jesus transfigured proved to Peter that everything the Bible bears witness to is really true – that everything Jesus said was in fact the greater truth which has come to confront and to redeem and to transform every human life. That God is real. That the story that the Bible tells isn't just true, it's real, it's actual – it happened and is happening still right now. That what we on earth are ever tempted to dismiss as other-worldly and unprovable is in fact as real as it gets. *"We saw it with our own eyes,"* writes Peter – and we just hear the remembered awe and amazement even through those words written on a page. *"We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father."*

But isn't it interesting that what Peter refers to most is not to what he saw, but to what he heard on that mountain. He saw that Jesus was God in the flesh. He saw the glory of God revealed in Jesus. He saw that heaven was more real and much closer than he had ever imagined before. But what he remembered most, what he wrote about later, was not so much what he saw, but what he had heard – the voice of God the Father, hidden within the cloud, saying, *"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"* And therein lies the second meaning Peter draws from the Transfiguration – the second meaning of that moment on the mountain also for us. That as Jesus, transfigured, was revealed to be God in the flesh – confirming that everything Jesus did and said had come straight from God and was the truest of all Truth – therefore, says the voice of the Father, the first and most critical thing for we human beings to do on this earth is to listen to Him!

We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard – God's glory, God's voice. The prophetic word was confirmed to us. You'll do well to keep focusing on it. It's the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts.

"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" Listen to Jesus. Because He not only knows the Truth and reveals to us the Truth – there, on that mountain, He is revealed to be the Truth – and the Way and the Life. Listen to Him!

So, if we really want to know what is really going on in this universe God has made – listen to Jesus. If we really want to know what a human life is really for – listen to Jesus. If we really want to know how to build a life of genuine and lasting meaning and joy – listen to Jesus. If we really want to know what to base our values and morals upon – listen to Jesus. If we really want to know the truth that will set us free – listen to Jesus. If we really want to know what is really going on in these lives of ours, what is really at stake in these lives of ours – listen to Jesus. If we

really want to know what is to come, what it is we may hope for, what it is that will meet us on the other side of death – listen to Jesus.

Don Everts, a pastor and teacher, has written this beautiful prayer and plea – one Peter certainly would have agreed with and approved:

Oh, let us gaze into his eyes. Let us stand before this humble carpenter and let his beauty knock down our defenses. And our pride. And control and shame and hesitancy. And let us run with him a wild race of truth and beauty and grace. Let us pour out our most treasured prizes upon him, only him.

Let us abandon all for him.

Let us no longer be couch-sitting Christians . . . Let us become people of the Way. Jesus followers . . .

Let us throw off this heavy blanket of cultural Christianity and relearn how to run. How to repent. How to lose our lives instead of always trying to save them. How to be used by God. How to change this world.

Let us relearn how to . . . worship, how to study, how to kneel, how to touch, how to trust. Jesus is so rich. So full. So utterly captivating and beautiful and worth everything we have. He is all.

Help us stand before your beauty with open eyes, Jesus. And help us respond from the bravest parts of our souls.⁸

“Listen to him!” “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” The one light we have in a dark time as we wait for the daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star.

I don’t know if Gordon Atkinson has yet seen his burning bush – he shut down his blog a while back. I suspect he is like all of us who seek after Christ, seek to listen to Christ – that while we may not have a moment as clear and vivid as Peter looking upon the face of Christ on that mountain, there are given to us smaller moments approaching that greater moment on the mountain. Smaller transfiguration moments, perhaps – but moments in which we do see something of what Peter saw, hear something of what Peter heard. Moments in which God does draw a little closer to us and speaks just a little bit more clearly and intimately to us. I’ve had such moments, not many but enough. And I hope and pray that you have too.

In another one of his blog posts from way back when, Atkinson does tell of one such smaller transfiguration moment in his own experience. He tells of being alone in the church on a Wednesday afternoon, setting up the tables and chairs for the Wednesday dinner. Over the church’s sound system he was playing the music of one of his favorite groups, a Celtic Christian group called Eden’s Bridge. As he worked, they began singing his favorite song, “*Be Thou My Vision*”⁹ – which we are also going to sing at the end of our service:

*Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;
Be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,*

Both waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.

And the beauty of that song, the beauty of the words just stopped him in his tracks, he writes. He just stood there, in the middle of the Fellowship Hall, hands resting on the back of a chair, not moving, just letting the music fill him. He writes:

Somewhere in the listening I started to cry. These were the good tears that come from joy. There was sadness in the joy because of the longing, but this sadness was rich and sweet . . .

I wept because I am not my own. I cannot speak to you as a free man. I was raised from childhood to give my life to Christ. Now the profound nature of that giving has become the source of my happiness. How can I separate myself from that which brings joy? Why would I want to?

. . . I have nothing to offer the Creator but myself. Here I am. I have nothing to claim but grace. I want more from life than I deserve and have given back less than I should.

I cannot see the path. I know not the way. I have not avoided the obstacles. Blinded and uncertain, I have only this prayer: Be Thou my vision.¹⁰

“And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!’”

¹ Gordon Atkinson (Real Live Preacher), “A Burning Bush Would Be Nice,” accessed on July 31, 2006. As best as I can tell, this is no longer available on the internet.

² Psalm 13:1.

³ Job 13:24.

⁴ Isaiah 45:15.

⁵ Luke 9:18-20.

⁶ The burning bush story is found in Exodus 3:1ff.

⁷ II Peter 1:16-19, as translated in Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2218.

⁸ Don Everts, God in the Flesh (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 153-154.

⁹ Here is Eden Bridge, “Be Thou My Vision”: [Be Thou My Vision - YouTube](#).

¹⁰ Gordon Atkinson (Real Live Preacher), “Be Thou My Vision.” I can’t find this blogpost on the internet either, however a slightly different version does appear in Atkinson’s book, RealLivePreacher.com (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 37-39.