

## February 23, 2020 (Transfiguration Sunday) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 17:1–9](#)

TITLE: **Do You See What I See?**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Amy Herman is a visual educator who uses works of art to teach Navy SEALs, doctors and crime scene investigators skills to see things more clearly. She says: “The fact is that no matter how skilled you might be at looking, you still have so much to learn about seeing. Because we all think we get it in a first glance and a sudden flash, but the real skill is in understanding how to look slowly and how to look more carefully. That talent is in remembering—in the crush of the daily urgencies that demand our attention—to step back and look through those lenses to help us see what we’ve been missing all along.”<sup>1</sup>

Herman tells this story of taking a group of counterterrorism officials to a museum to see El Greco’s painting, “The Purification of the Temple,” in which Christ—in the center, in a sweeping and violent gesture—is expelling the sinners from the temple of prayer.

“The group of counterterrorism officials had five minutes with that painting, and in that short amount of time, they had to assess the situation, analyze the details, articulate what, if anything they would do if they were in that painting. As you can imagine, observations and insights differed. Who would they talk to? Who would be the best witness? Who was a good potential witness? Who was lurking? Who had the most information? But my favorite comment came from a seasoned cop who looked at the central figure and said, ‘You see that guy in the pink?’—referring to Christ—he said, ‘I’d collar him, he’s causing all the trouble.’”

Herman’s advice: To slow down; to ask questions; to talk about what we see before drawing conclusions is helpful for us—whether we are gazing upon a work of art or trying to understand a person better.

Her advice seems particularly fitting as we together look more closely at our text for today. Frankly, Matthew’s Gospel is nothing shy of a work of art itself. We might remember that Matthew was a Jewish author writing for a Jewish audience. So he masterfully paints a portrait of Jesus as the new Moses all throughout his Gospel. We see it in the stories he tells of Jesus’ birth—of parents fleeing to Egypt to protect their infant son from the evil of a king’s decree. We see it when Jesus delivers his sermon on the Mount—going high atop a mountain to deliver God’s word, as Moses received the 10 commandments from atop Mt. Sinai.

And we see allusions to the Hebrew Scripture all throughout the nine verses of our Gospel lesson for today: Once again God is encountered high atop a mountain. Jesus is met by Moses and Elijah—two people who also encountered God on mountaintops; two figures representing God’s revelation through the law and through the prophets. And Jesus glows—another allusion to Moses here too. Remember how his face glowed so brightly after encountering God that he needed to wear a veil?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_herman\\_a\\_lesson\\_on\\_looking](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_herman_a_lesson_on_looking)

We read, too, of a bright cloud enfolding them, from which the voice of God is heard. And again, Matthew reminds us of the bright cloud of God's glory that shows up again and again in the Hebrew scriptures: enfolding Mt Sinai; filling Solomon's temple in Jerusalem; as the hub of activity in Ezekiel's vision.

Cool, right?

But what does it all mean?

We usually read this text as an affirmation that Peter got it right when he professed that Jesus was the Messiah, some 6 days earlier. We hear God's voice confirming Christ's Sonship, as we did at his baptism, and now see him radiant with bright light. We hear God affirm that the disciples should listen to him as the one who fulfills the law and the prophets. In Christ, everything is neatly held together.

Yet it also seems as if God is reminding these three disciples of the divinity of Jesus just before he starts to head to Jerusalem. Soon Jesus and his disciples will start the journey to Jerusalem to share a Passover meal. Soon the same disciples who got to see Jesus wrapped in glory on this mountaintop will fall asleep in a garden as he prays for help. Soon Jesus will be betrayed by someone he called friend. Soon the disciples will run and hide and deny they ever followed Jesus in the first place as their rabbi is tortured and killed. Soon life will change. They will no longer be able to sit at his feet and trust that they will be able to have a feast on just a few crumbs of bread. Yes, Jesus will leave the tomb, but they won't be able to hold onto him as they once did. Things will be different. Jesus will even look different.

One commentator says this:

On one hand, the transfiguration affirms Jesus' divinity; on the other, it begins to give the disciples eyes to see God's light in the chaos to come: death, loss, fear and resurrection, the world of the early church. The challenge to the disciples is to live in a world without Jesus' bodily presence. The transfiguration anticipates this challenge, inviting us to live in 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). As that light shines in our hearts, the incarnate God is made real in the every day.<sup>2</sup>

Great, you say. But what might this mean for us?

With the disciples, we receive this glimpse of the divinity of Christ just before we head into the wilderness of Lent, and our own approach of the cross. We make connections that Jesus is a part of God's story and ours

But the gift that Matthew has given us in these nine verses is an invitation to see. In a short story—just a paragraph, really—Matthew invites us to really look at Jesus, and in this moment to see so many things about him: See what we've been missing. See what

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word p 454

we've taken for granted. See that he is more than we had imagined and different than we expected. See that he is human—with sweat on his forehead and dust on his feet. See him as God's Son, radiant with God's glory. See him as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. See him as comforter and lifter of our heads.

It is as if Matthew gives us this moment, packs it with meaning, and helps us see more about Jesus. But then, once we think we've found all of the symbolism in this work of art; once we think we've figured this passage out, then he reminds us that even in the mountaintop moments of our lives we are only able to catch a glimpse of Jesus in his fullness. There is more to Jesus than we can ever understand.

See, we often fall into a trap of thinking that we can figure everything out—the motives of a neighbor, the plans of a coworker, the will of God—if we just look hard enough. But our looking becomes clearer when we recognize that our perspective is limited. We can only see through the lens of our own eyes. We can only approach the world—and God—from our personal point of view.

And, frankly, our vision is impacted by our experiences and assumptions; by our biases and our hopes. What we're able to see is impacted by how strong a cup of coffee we drank, by how filling a breakfast we ate in the morning and by how much sleep we got at night. Our perspective is shaped by our fears, our desire to be the best and our conviction in the truth of what we know.

Matthew invites us to open our eye. Matthew reminds us that there is often more to a person than meets the eye. Upon the mountaintop, we get to see more about Jesus, but we also realize that there is more to Jesus than we can see with one glance; understand in one small heart; or even express in words.

This revelation at the top of a high mountain is not meant to scare us or frustrate us—or even amaze us. Rather, it serves as an invitation—an invitation to let go of our hopes for encapsulating Jesus—for trying to confine him to the shrines of our own making—and to **encounter** him instead.

In fact, this is a practice we can make good use of in our own lives—with those we meet, those with whom we work, even with those upon whom we've given up. We can look more deeply, see more clearly—and in seeing, expand our view to acknowledge that there is more to Jesus—and to one another—than meets the eye. From this place of humility we are free, then, to meet God—and to meet God in one another.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests this:

What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, *life*—and are never the same again? I mean, what *don't* people run into in the Bible? Not just terrifying clouds and hair-raising voices but also crazy relatives, persistent infertility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with

life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and knee-wobbling love.<sup>3</sup>

What if, by seeing the transfigured Jesus, we are changed too? What if our assumptions about others are challenged, our perceptions less fixed? What if we are opened to see the power of God's love radiating brightly around us, within us, and calling us forward?

What do you see on the mountaintop? A shining savior? A vision of holiness? A revelation of God's power? A symbol of God's word at work through time?

I don't know about you, but I see love—a love that has the power to change the world. May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the\\_bright\\_cloud\\_of\\_unknowing](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing)