



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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**SERMON – TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY**

**MATTHEW 17:1-9**

**FEBRUARY 19, 2023**

**“TWO HILLS...ONE DIVINE REVELATION”**

A woman came into my office one morning and wanted to discuss the grief she'd been experiencing over the death of a family member. During our conversation she said her relationship with God had changed – she had questions about God she'd not entertained before the death of her sibling, and it was not easy for her to admit to having questions such as *“is God real...is God powerful...is God loving...and if God is powerful and loving why did my loved one die?”* The questions she was asking surprised her, they were rather unwelcome, but they are not uncommon.

If someone thinks about God at all, and in truth few humans exist even today who do not, they tend to think about these very things because characteristically humans believe or want to believe in something beyond themselves – that is even true in our famously individualistic culture. For so called secularists these days, that *“something beyond themselves”* is the power of the state which they equate with God in that it is or can be powerful and benevolent – that is, loving. Even so called “atheists” believe in something – even if that “something” is actually a conceited view of themselves projected onto whatever they happen to admire, rely on, enjoy – “believe in”.

Did you know that the very first Christians were called “atheists” and thrown to the lions because of it? They did not believe in Rome's gods – to whom power and protection – a sort of love, were ascribed. My office visitor's questions thought uncomfortable for her were anything but strange or out of place. She wanted to know what could make sense of her suffering, or to whom she could turn to alleviate it. Those are very good questions.

The very first Christians believed that was the God who suffered too – Jesus, and in our Lutheran tradition, as I shared with my visitor, that is known by the term *“theology of the cross.”* They believed that if God in the person of Jesus and his humanity truly suffered, and this suffering was God's revelation of himself, then in their suffering they too would “see God.” A document of the Lutheran Reformation period, known as the Formula of Concord, says this; *“if I believe that only the human nature (of Jesus) suffered for me, then Christ would be a poor Savior indeed. In fact, he himself would need a Savior. But this person (Jesus) is truly God, and therefore it is correct to say the Son of God suffers.”*

And even to us Christians, to say nothing of the rest of the world, this makes no sense. – that the very thing we would call “evil” or “bad” – suffering, is in fact God's real, true work and fullest expression of who He is. Steve Paulson, professor of theology with the 1517 Institute in California, says *“the cross is disorienting because it does not give us what we want. It will not measure righteousness by the law, then reward us accordingly.”* And it disorients because while it might seem a loving thing it by no means seems powerful – what sort of God dies on a cross? It does not seem to solve the problem of suffering – the very thing my office visitor struggled with.

The disciples of Jesus, when confronted by the visages of Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah the Prophet, after their stomachs settled that is, must have been giddy with delight because their presence suggested Jesus was going to be their sort of Messiah, and fulfill the law and the prophets by using the law prophetically to save Israel.

Initially nothing on the Mount of Transfiguration disturbed this view – Moses and Elijah with Jesus are “surrounded by a cloud” and then vanish – as though to say “Jesus, you got this...take it from here...you know the program.” The voice which said “this is my Son, listen to him” seems to ratify that understanding.

Till the voice of Jesus said, “tell no one about this until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” Tell no one I am God’s Son, till they see what sort of God sent his son. The scene at the Transfiguration offers in parallel and contrast the very thing Jesus alluded to by saying “raised from the dead.” Jesus is not divine because he is bathed in light - in Luke’s version of this story Moses and Elijah were too and they’re not divine. In fact, Jesus himself said in Matthew 13:43 that all believers will one day “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” – and we surely are not divine.

If you want to see divinity, both the early Christians and our theology of the cross insist, you have to look, however surprisingly or distressingly at Jesus’ suffering and death. Is God loving...is God powerful...if so, why do we suffer? Because that is how God’s power and love are evident. To the world this makes no sense of course – power protects, and love soothes and prospers. Which is why many ears today listen not to Jesus, but to other sources that offer, according to their own terms that is, power and protection.

But we preach, as Paul says, Christ crucified, folly to some, a roadblock to others. So, the mountaintop explains the hilltop, and vice versa, and they call us to reckon with the following – in the Transfiguration Jesus is revealed in glory, on Calvary in shame. On the mountain Jesus’ clothes are dazzling white, on Calvary he is stripped of them entirely. On the mountain Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah – on Calvary two criminals, who represent the level Israel had sunk attempting to bring the kingdom of God to earth by human means.

On the mountain Peter excitedly talks of how wonderful Jesus is – at Calvary he is nowhere to be found after denying he even knew Jesus. On the mountain, God said Jesus was his Son and they didn’t understand. At Calvary, a pagan soldier saw Him die, and did. “Say nothing to anyone about this vision till the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” Now do you understand a theology of the cross? The power and love of God do not find but create what is pleasing to and brings God glory. Such as when a sinner or someone who suffers says, “I cannot do this on my own – I need Jesus. Where must I go to find Him.”

Dear people, listen for the power and love of God in the voice of Jesus, not least when he says take up your cross and follow. AMEN