

GLORIFIED

Matthew 16:24, 17:8

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

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Usually, I don't feature movies in sermons.

However, If I had access to video equipment this morning, I might have been tempted to show the scene that occurs at the close of "The Godfather."

Al Pacino's 'Michael Corleone' literally is becoming his crime family's Godfather, as he is also ritually fulfilling his responsibility as the godfather of his sister, Connie's four-month-old son.

There is heavy irony in this scene as Michael is standing before a baptismal font in a cathedral as his nephew's sponsor, responding to the priest's admonition that he "renounce Satan and all his works."

Simultaneously, the "hits" he has ordered against rival gang leaders take place across New York City's five boroughs.

This is the scene of Michael's final transformation, becoming the person he did NOT want to be — the Don, the crime boss, the Corleone Godfather.

He's revealing his new identity through murder.

Francis Ford Coppola, the Oscar-winning director of this Oscar-winning film, shares a technique from the Gospel of Matthew — the juxtaposing of contrasting scenes to reinforce a powerful message or reality.

Last Sunday, we read from Matthew's 14th Chapter, which began with King Herod Antipas' hosting of his own birthday banquet, attended by his invited elite friends, and serving John the Baptist's head on a platter.

The very next passage spoke of King Jesus' banquet, seating over five thousand common people, feeding them with just five loaves and two fishes, following a day filled with curing the sick.

What a comparison!

Whose banquet would you want to attend — the King of death's or the King of Heaven's?

Another example is provided for us from today's Narrative Lectionary reading for this Transfiguration Sunday, which concludes the Epiphany season and the Christmas cycle, and prefigures the upcoming seasons of Lent and Easter.

Just before our passage, Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

His short, Holy Spirit-inspired confession is a concentrated description of the person and the work of Jesus.

Peter says who Jesus is — the unique Son of God, who has the same character, the same powers and the same rights as God the Father.

Peter also declares what Jesus will do.

He is the "Anointed One," named and appointed by God to deliver His people from their sins.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jesus immediately told His disciples to tell no one who He is.

The reasons for His command of silence are clear enough.

First, as Messiah, some people would expect Him to take up arms and liberate the Jews from their Roman oppression.

Better to avoid mass bloodshed by keeping quiet.

Second, we see that Jesus' disciples, even Peter, hardly comprehend this revelation.

Jesus must explain Himself much more fully, and the Spirit must quicken their minds and prepare them for what it will mean to truly follow Jesus.

Matthew 16:21 says "*From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things*" (ESV).

Each phrase from this first of three passion predictions carries significant meaning.

First, "*from that time*" marks a shift in mission.

Now that the disciples know Jesus is the Messiah, He can begin to explain how He will save His people.

Matthew says that Jesus *“began to show His disciples,”* because He is only starting this instruction.

Like a good teacher, He will have to repeat Himself.

Jesus also says *“He must go to Jerusalem.”*

He does not say He “will go.”

He is predicting His death, but it is more than a forecast.

Jesus will die because He **MUST** die.

Jesus then tells His disciples that the cross and resurrection are first, God’s word of life, and second, God’s paradigm for discipleship.

He said, *“If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me”* (16:24).

Jesus does not call us to die to atone for sin.

HE did that, once and for all.

But He **DOES** call us to live for others daily, just as He did daily (Luke 9:23).

Jesus gives us three commands in Matthew 16:24.

Each is in the present tense, which means we must perform them continually.

First, Jesus says, **deny yourself.**

In Titus, a letter I hope to study this fall, it says that we are to say no to our passions and lusts and live for Him.

Second, Jesus says to **take up your cross.**

Some Christians like to refer to a chronic illness, or a burden they must bear — “their cross.”

But to bear the cross is to take action, not to suffer passively.

We bear the cross when we take care of others.

Third, Jesus says, **follow me.**

To follow Jesus is largely a matter of self-denial and cross-bearing.

But in Matthew’s Gospel, it is a summons to believe all Jesus says, to obey all His commands, and to make His life a pattern for ours.

As we move into the 17th Chapter as part of today's assigned reading, Matthew writes *“after six days.”*

The Gospel writer is referring to the time that has elapsed since Jesus has predicted His death, and the present moment, when Jesus took His closest disciples — Peter, James, and John — to the top of an isolated mountain in Northern Galilee.

In the Bible, important things take place on mountains.

It was on Mt. Sinai that God first called Moses to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt.

Later, it was on this same mountain that God delivered to Moses the Ten Commandments.

Centuries later, on Mount Carmel, Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal.

This was truly a mountaintop experience for the disciples, and they never forgot it.

Years later, Peter captured the essence of this event in his second letter.

He wrote:

“We had been eyewitnesses of His Majesty.

For He received Honor and Glory from God the Father, when that voice was conveyed to Him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, My Beloved, with Whom I am well pleased.’

We ourselves heard this Voice come from heaven, while we were with Him on the mountain” (II Peter 7:16-18).

As Jesus prayed, His face began to shine like the sun.

His clothes became dazzling white.

As the popular Christmas carol, ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing’ puts it, **“the Godhead was ‘veiled in flesh.’ ”**

On the mountain, Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah.

“Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus” (17:3).

These men represent three things:

- They represent the law and the prophets.
Both the law and the prophets spoke of the coming of the Deliverer.
- Both labored to deliver God's people, so both foreshadowed the work of Jesus.
- Both had an unusual departure, or exodus, from their lives.
Moses died alone in the mountains, where no shrine could be erected to his memory.
God took Elijah to heaven on a chariot of fire.

Matthew says they talked.

What about, it does not say.

Luke, in his Gospel version of this event, says they talked about the departure, the "exodus" that Jesus would soon accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

In other words, they spoke of His death.

Peter, of course, is awestruck, reverent, enthusiastic, and confused.

"Lord, it is good for us to be here.

If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (17:4).

Before Jesus can answer Peter's request, two things happen almost simultaneously.

A cloud envelops the group, and The Father speaks.

God sends a cloud of light to surround Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and, apparently, the disciples.

It is no ordinary Cloud, but God's Glory-Cloud.

This Cloud appears many times in the Hebrew scriptures.

Above all, it took the form of a large pillar, marking the sign of God's presence, especially in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt.

In the Cloud, to cite a few examples:

- The Lord guided the Israelites through the desert, so they found water and food (Ex. 13:21; Num. 14:14).

- The Lord protected them from danger, such as the armies of Egypt (Ex. 14:19-20).
- The Lord revealed Himself to Moses (Ex. 33:10).
- The Lord called Israel to revere and worship Him (Ex. 33:10).
- The Lord filled the tabernacle, and later, the temple.

In short, the Cloud brought the disciples into the awesome presence of God, so they were afraid.

The Father covers them with light, and says:

“This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well-pleased; listen to Him!”
(17:5).

The climactic moment of the transfiguration account is the affirmation of Jesus by God.

The confirmation of Jesus as God’s Beloved and pleasing Son echoes the same words at Jesus’ baptism, and affirms Jesus’ ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing.

In this way, Jesus is shown to be God’s chosen and authorized servant.

The command, ***“listen to Him,”*** serves both the disciples and Matthew’s readers.

All believers should listen and follow what Jesus says.

And what we hear from Jesus in these “discipleship chapters” of Matthew’s Gospel sometimes involves teachings that challenge our cherished understandings, much like they did to Jesus’ disciples, who struggled to comprehend His expectations for them.

For example, Jesus teaches about a way of discipleship that is cruciformed or cross-shaped, as His own mission and ministry are.

This cruciformity pushes His disciples away from their own preoccupations with their own interests and statuses in the coming Kingdom, and draws them to serve others.

Teaching these truths from Jesus continues to be important to churches, who see their existence just for themselves and not for others.

Beloved people of God,
with the '**Glorified**' Jesus on the Mount of transfiguration, the disciples were given a glimpse, a mere preview if you will, of Jesus' up-coming resurrection, exultation, and glory on Easter Sunday, even as He now turns toward Jerusalem and His anticipated passion and death.

To have this '**Glorified**' glimpse of Jesus and God's confirmation of His identity as the Beloved Son, we can listen to Jesus as He continues to strengthen our faith and discipleship as we begin the forty-day penitential season of Lent, starting this week with Ash Wednesday.

AMEN