

“Overshadowed and Overcome”
Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration of the Lord

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A number of years ago, the popular television preacher Joel Osteen wrote a best-selling book called *Your Best Life Now*. Let me come clean from the outset—I’m not a Joel Osteen fan. But there’s a fascinating scene in the book, a scene I find very intriguing.

Osteen describes an event he witnessed as a boy growing up.

Osteen’s father was a Pentecostal minister, and one week their church held a revival. A guest preacher came. The preacher stayed at the Osteen house, which put a significant strain on the family budget.

Osteen’s father made a mere \$115/week; one more mouth to feed was not easy for the family to handle.

A businessman in the congregation noticed this, and at the end of the week, he approached Osteen’s dad.

“Pastor, I know you cared for our guest speaker in your home all week. Things are tight, and I realize you can’t afford those extra expenses. I want you to have this money personally, just to help you out.”

And he handed Osteen’s father a check for one thousand dollars.

Osteen then describes his father’s reaction:

How on the one hand his dad very touched by the church member’s generosity.

And how on the other hand,
his father was holding the check by the edge of the corner
as if it might contaminate him.

And he said, “Oh, no, brother, I could never receive this money.
We must put it in the church offering.”

Joel Osteen describes this event from his childhood with a certain amount of condescension toward his father. He describes his father's faith at that time as a "cheese and crackers" Christianity, saying that his father was unable to see "the banquet table" that God wants all of us to have.

He even goes on to PRAISE his dad for changing his mind in later years, saying that when his father admitted that he should have taken the money, his father finally had his theology right!¹

Did Osteen's father finally get his theology right?
Or did he have it right the first time, when he gave the money away?

I mention this scene not because I'm interested in Joel Osteen.

I mention it because I would like you to consider a more fundamental theological question, one that lies behind not just Joel Osteen's life, but each of our lives:

How comfortable does God want us to be?

Have you ever asked yourself this question before?
How comfortable does God want followers of Jesus to be?

I ask the question because of our text.

In our text, Jesus takes Peter and James and John,
and they go up a mountain,
and Jesus is transfigured before these disciples.

"...his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

Then Moses appears.
And Elijah appears.
And Peter says he'll build tents, so that everyone can stay right there!

¹ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now*, New York: FaithWords, Hachette Book Group, 2014.

Peter is getting pretty comfortable on that mountain.

But then a cloud overshadows them.

And a voice speaks from the cloud.

And “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

And suddenly, being in the presence of God is not so comfortable anymore.

Do you come to church because this is a comfortable place for you?

Or do you come here to hear God’s voice, in scripture and in song and in silence...and sometimes, that voice makes you...UNCOMFORTABLE?

If you read the text carefully, you may even notice that it’s the voice from the cloud that seems to truly UNSETTLE the disciples.

Do you remember what it says?

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

It’s a specific command: Listen to him!

Almost as if the disciples—would NOT want to listen to Jesus.

Why would the disciples, at this point in their journey, NOT listen to Jesus?

I think the answer can be found in the context for today’s story.

The before and the after.

Let’s take a step back.

The transfiguration is a kind of PIVOT POINT in the life of Jesus.

Up to this point in the story, Jesus has had a very successful ministry, right?

He’s fed five thousand,

he’s walked on water,

he’s stilled a storm,

he’s healed people,

he even brought a young girl, who was at death’s door, back to life...

And it would be easy for the disciples to think, at this point in the journey, that's what Jesus' ministry is all about:

Stopping storms.
Saving children.

Making his followers and the forgotten more comfortable.

Then we have the transfiguration, and Peter and James and John hear a voice telling them—listen to Jesus...because it might be hard, very hard, in the near future, to listen to Jesus.

Why?

Well, what has NOT YET happened in the gospel story?

Jesus has not been betrayed.

Jesus has not been tortured.

Jesus has not been condemned and killed like a criminal.

Before the transfiguration...Jesus experiences great success.

After the transfiguration...Jesus will experience great suffering.

He even says as much right after our text, chapter 17, verses 22-23:

“As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.’”

And how do the disciples respond?

Matthew writes, “And they [the disciples] were greatly distressed.”

Distressed because Jesus—the Son of God—is going to suffer.

Distressed because maybe this means that followers of Jesus—

those who model their lives after Jesus—

might also be called to suffer...

It all leads back to the question:

How comfortable does God want followers of Jesus to be?

Have you ever asked yourself that question?

It's not hard to find a good place to ask that question.

How many of you, at this moment, are sitting in basically the SAME PLACE that you like to sit every Sunday? Why do you gravitate toward the same pew?

I bet it's because it's what you're used to doing.

It's what makes you comfortable.

What would happen if you made a point during the season of Lent to sit in a different place every Sunday, so that you could meet some new people in your church?

Or would that be too uncomfortable for a bunch of Presbyterians?

Just how comfortable does God expect us to be?

You see, there's a part of me that really wants to AVOID that question.

Back in seminary, I spent a summer as a hospital chaplain.

One evening, I was called into the emergency room as a one-year-old was being whisked into the trauma unit. The child had fallen into a pool, parents didn't see the child fall in the pool.

The child didn't make it.

Her parents were distraught.

So I was there with them, got a glass of water for them, as mother and father were facing an onslaught of shock and horror and grief.

I was there for about five minutes with them.

Then I quietly slipped out the door.

The next day I talked it over with my supervisor.

She said, very gently, “Ben, you’re doing well, but last night you made a mistake. You should have stayed. You didn’t need to say anything, no need to do anything. But you should have stayed with those parents longer than you did.”

Of course I should have stayed.
It was my job, as a chaplain, to be present for those people.
Why did I decide to leave those people?

Almost 25 years later, the answer seems obvious.
I was uncomfortable with their grief.
I was uncomfortable with their suffering.

How comfortable does God expect us to be?
Please don’t misunderstand the question.

I do not mean to imply that there is this side to God that wants or wills or wishes that God’s children will be hammered—
as if suffering is divine punishment,
or just part of God’s mysterious plan.

If anyone here today is going through a particularly difficult time,
I do not mean to imply that your difficulties **IN ANY WAY**
come from the hand and heart of God...

The unexpected diagnosis.
The loss of a job.
The failure of a marriage.

Events that are not your choice, and they are not God’s choice.

I believe that God walks with us through those moments.
I do not believe God is the cause of those moments.

But in the Christian faith, there’s another way to approach suffering.
And that’s the suffering that we do choose to enter into.

The suffering that we decide to go through for the sake of someone else.

And that's where the transfiguration comes into play.

Yes, this dazzling and beautiful moment on the mountaintop affirms for Peter and James and John that Jesus is God's Son.

But what kind of Son?

If you keep reading, not a Son who rules with weapons,
but a Son who will submit to the Roman execution in weakness.

Not a Messiah who gets rid of everyone's suffering.
But a Messiah who is present in the midst of suffering.

A Messiah who asks his followers to do the same...

Years ago, there was a small community in France that resisted the Nazi occupation of WWII.

This tiny Huguenot village saved the lives of scores of children.
They took in adults too, refugees, people who were fleeing the Nazis and looking for a safe place to live.

The heart of the community was its pastor, Andre Trocme, and his wife, Magda.

In her words, it all started one evening when:

"A...woman knocked at my door...and she said she was a German Jew, coming from northern France, that she was in danger, and that she had heard that in Le Chambon somebody could help her. Could she come into my house?"

And even though housing refugees would mean less food for her own children and more DANGER for her family, Magda Trocme said, "Naturally, come in, come in."

Many years later, a veteran of WWII named Philip Hallie wrote the story of that community in his marvelous book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.

After the book was published, he gave lectures to various groups about the story of that village.

One evening, he was speaking in Minneapolis.
When the lecture was done, Hallie asked for questions.
And a woman in the back of the room stood up.

She was “a powerful woman wearing a sheath dress that made her body look like a slender cannon, taut, full of explosive power.”

She asked if the village of Le Chambon was in the Department of Haute-Loire in south-central France...

Hallie replied yes, that was the same village he was talking about.
Hallie says that this tall, powerful woman seemed to crumple.

Then she said, “Well, you have been speaking about the village that saved the lives of all three of my children.”

ABSOLUTE SILENCE.

Then this woman made her way to the front of the room.

She faced the audience and said, “The Holocaust was storm, lightning, thunder, wind, rain, yes. And Le Chambon was the rainbow.”²

All because a group of Christians decided NOT to turn their backs on refugees.

Have you ever wondered how comfortable God wants us to be?

Amidst all the news about the death of Kobe Bryant last month—
I was reminded of the death of another former NBA player,
less publicized at the time of his death.

² Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, New York: HarperCollins, 1979.

Do any of you remember Manute Bol?

Bol was a 7 foot 7 inch center who, unlike Bryant, couldn't score a lick during his 10-year basketball career. But he still made a small fortune playing in the NBA.

After he retired, he had the opportunity to set up a very comfortable life for himself.

Do you know what he decided to do?
He decided to use his money to build hospitals.

Bol was a Sudanese immigrant, and he provided aid for Sudanese refugees. He went broke building these hospitals, and then, when "his fortune dried up, Bol raised more money for charity by doing what most athletes would find humiliating:

He turned himself into a humorous spectacle.

At 7 feet, 7 inches, Bol was hired...as a horse jockey,
a hockey player,
and celebrity boxer."

One journalist wrote:

"...who could deny the comic potential of Bol boxing William "the Refrigerator" Perry, the 335-pound former defensive lineman of the Chicago Bears?"

The writer goes on:

"Bol agreed to be a clown. But he was not willing to be mocked for personal gain...Bol let himself be ridiculed on behalf of suffering strangers in the Sudan; he was a fool for Christ."

"During his final years, Bol suffered more than mere mockery in the service of others. While he was doing relief work in the Sudan, he contracted a painful skin disease that ultimately contributed to his death."

And yet there can be no doubt why Bol did what he did.

“God guided me to America and gave me a good job,” he said.
“But he also gave me a heart so I would look back.”³

I see a room full of good hearts.

How comfortable does God want your heart to be?

It’s not just Manute Bol who wrestled with that question.
I think, I hope—that you and I are also called to wrestle with this question.

Your answer to that question may take you to...
a place that’s uncharted and unfamiliar for you,
a place that goes far beyond the pews in this church.

It may take you to a place where you will find Jesus.

And when Jesus sees you, he’ll tell you he’s OVERJOYED
that even in the midst of your discomfort,
you decided to show up.

Amen.

³ “Manute Bol’s Radical Christianity,” by Jon A. Shields, in *The Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2010.