

**“Making a Messiah” / Unit 3: Closing Arguments  
Sermon 2: The Transfiguration / March 10, 2019**

**Key Text:** Luke 9.28-36

**Key Words:** Transfiguration, Theophany, Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John, Luke, historical authenticity, veil, glory of God

**Summary:** After blowing their minds by telling the disciples that as Messiah he had to suffer and die, and that following him might make their lives much harder, he confirms that he really is their Messiah by giving them a peek at who he really is. And God the Father shows us, and tells us to listen, and follow him. We probe the historical evidences that it really happened.

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If you have a Bible or a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find Luke chapter 9. In a couple minutes we’re going to jump in at verse 28. Luke 9.28. I’ll be reading from the New Living Translation.

Okay, how many of you guys love movies? I think there are fewer now, but I have always loved going to the movies. In fact, Friday night we went and watched Captain Marvel. It wasn’t bad. And I’m not that picky (except for chick flicks). I love a good western, sci-fi, action, adventure, comedy, epics, even the occasional horror flick - which I find kind of funny. Films like Braveheart, Schindler’s List, anything Marvel, anything DC, Star Wars, Star Trek, Alien, The Princess Bride, Monte Python. When I was a professor, Julie and I would have movie nights on Friday nights. Anywhere from 20-30 students would crowd into our living room for a movie and some popcorn. For a college kid it provided a cheap place to take a date and we’d make sure you behaved. For years afterwards Friday night was our own family night, when we’d all try to get together for dinner and a movie.

Now, two of the things I love about going to the movies are the previews, and the special effects. In fact, Andy sends me links whenever a new trailer comes out for something we’ve spotted in the previews. Have you seen the previews for the Avengers “Endgame,” or “Dark Phoenix” in the X-Men series? We’re excited!

And then there are the special effects. In my lifetime special effects they have gone from really, really cheesy, to unbelievably good. I grew up a real Star Trek fan - not quite a “Trekkie,” but almost. But when I go back and watch those old episodes, the special effects were really pretty bad ... at least by today’s standards. But a couple of weeks ago, my son Andy and I went and saw Alita, Battle Angel. The main character - in fact most of the scenes -- were completely CGI. And it was incredible! Unbelievably ... real!

But listen: Guys, we live in a world in which there is so much make believe, and in which make believe looks so real, that we have become hyper-skeptical. So ... .. was Jesus’ stuff really real? Did this stuff really happen the way these eyewitnesses say it did?

Luke chapter 9, starting with verse 28: “About eight days after saying this, Jesus climbed the mountain to pray, taking Peter, John, and James along (just his inner circle). While Jesus was in prayer, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became blinding white. At once two men were there talking with him. They turned out to be Moses and Elijah –and what a glorious appearance they made! They talked over his exodus, the one Jesus was about to complete in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Peter and those with him were slumped over in sleep. When they came to, rubbing their eyes, (holy cow!) they saw Jesus in his glory and the two men standing with him. (Was it real? They thought it was!) When Moses and Elijah had left, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, this is a great moment! Let’s build three memorials: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He (Peter) blurted this out without thinking. (No kidding!) While he was babbling on like this, a light-radiant cloud (a cloud that was eerily bright) enveloped them. As they found themselves buried in the cloud, they became deeply aware of God. Then there was a voice out of the cloud: “This is my Son, the Chosen! Listen to him.” (Was it real?! Was it really God?!) When the sound of the voice died away, they saw Jesus there alone. They were speechless. (No kidding!) And they continued speechless, said not one thing to anyone during those days of what they had seen.” ... But later! ...

Now, we’re in the middle of a series we’re calling “Making a Messiah.” Is Jesus really the Messiah of God? What is the evidence? Are there solid reasons we should take Jesus seriously! In January we dug into the

Gospel of Mark, and we focused on his godlike power. If Jesus really did the things the eyewitnesses say he did, he was way more than a man. In February we dug into the Gospel of Matthew and we focused on his godlike authority. If Jesus really said the things the eyewitnesses say he said, he was either an incredibly dangerous liar, or a ridiculously twisted lunatic, or he was actually ... God's Messiah. And now, in March, we're looking at what we're calling the Closing Arguments. Jesus just flat out comes out and claims it: "I am God's Messiah; in fact, I am the Son of God. Are you with me, or not?" And in the scene we're going to unpack today, Jesus just ... morphs, he transfigures ... right in front of them. He pulls down the veil and let's his God side pour out. And according to the eyewitnesses, God the Father shows up, and puts his stamp on Jesus, his Son.

We call this scene "The Transfiguration." Matthew and Mark actually use the term "metamorphoo," to transform, to metamorph. And the timing of the scene is critical. Last week we unpacked the scene where Jesus asks his disciples two questions: Who do the people around you say I am? ... Your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, the people you listen to. And then: "Who do you say I am." When Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, sent from God," Jesus says, "You got it. Now it's time for me to go die ... for you." And they are confused, and scared. Everyone knows that Messiah's don't die! Everyone except ... Jesus. And Jesus is like, "I'm not the kind of Messiah you were expecting. And the work I've got to do is way bigger than the kind of work you expect your kind of Messiah to do. I came to save you, I came to reconnect you to God, and that's going to take dying ... for you." (Luke 9.22) "Are you still with me? Are you still willing to follow me?"

And then, about 8 days later, Luke says (9.28) ... Luke doesn't insert many time stamps; and when he does, he wants you to lean in. About 8 days later Jesus proves to them, physically, that even though he was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting, he is God's Messiah. He kind of like pulls down his face, and it's kind of like the God-part of him just flows out. And then God the Father shows up. And God says, "This (Jesus) is my Son, he really is your Christ; follow him! I know he's scaring you, but follow him!"

Now guys, I take this story seriously; and I think you should too. Listen, if you are willing to admit that there just might be a God, this story has all these marks of historical authenticity. Of course, if you refuse to admit that there might be a God, then to you, someone had to just make this stuff up. But it takes way more faith to be an atheist than to be a theist. And if you are a theist, this story has all these marks of historical authenticity.

There are three accounts of the transfiguration, not just one. Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story. Historians call that “multiple attestation,” and it’s a big deal - more than one source. And, all three gospels tell the story a little differently, which is what you would expect from three reporters who haven’t “colluded” to tell the same story. Their differences in detail are a mark of authenticity. And, their accounts are based on the eyewitness testimony of 3 witnesses., not just one. If there was just one witness, I might think maybe the guy ate too many bad mushrooms and started hallucinating. Or maybe some first century chemist discovered LSD or something. But there were three eyewitnesses. And all three of these eyewitnesses went to their deaths swearing it went down just the way we read it. In fact, two of them were killed for preaching this stuff.

- One of the eyewitnesses, James, was the first recorded Christian martyr. According to Acts chapter 12, Herod Agrippa, who was the grandson of Herod the Great, the Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby ... Herod Agrippa launched an attack on the early church. And he had James killed with a sword, because James was a leader of the early church, and they were trying to crush us. (Acts 12.1-2)
- According to tradition, the second eyewitness, Peter, was crucified by Emperor Nero for being a Jesus follower in Rome in 64 BC. According to records he requested that he be crucified upside down, because he wasn’t worthy to die like Jesus. They call this, “St Peter’s cross.” Peter wrote two of the letters in our New Testament. In his second one, he says this: “We saw Jesus’ majestic splendor with our own eyes when he received honor and glory from God the Father. (I saw it go down!) The voice from the majestic glory of God said to him, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we

were with him on the holy mountain.” “It happened,” Peter said, “I was there.” And he died for this Jesus.

- John - well John lived to be an old man, in exile, still preaching Jesus. Never backing down, no matter the cost. Ended up writing of the books and letters of our New Testament. My daughter, Alatheia feels kind of bad for John. You see, James and Peter had these exciting deaths, as martyrs, and John had to die of old age. My daughter is kind of twisted.

And what’s even more remarkable is that these three guys - Peter, James, and John - when they finally did pass on this story, they didn’t make themselves look very good. Most people back then - most people today - try to make themselves look good in their stories. These guys didn’t; they just told it like it was. Another mark of historical authenticity. ... ..

Now ... every once in a while God gives someone a physical experience of his presence. Now we believe God is ... “omnipresent,” which means he is everywhere, all the time. He’s always around us; he’s always around all of us. And sometimes we sense his presence, we feel nudges. You’ve felt them. And sometimes it’s more than a whisper. Sometimes God pulls down the veil for us just far enough that it will bring you to tears, or rattle your bones. God is quite capable of blowing your socks off with just a gentle touch any time he wants to. Now for me that doesn’t happen often; for others of you more often, I suppose. That’s okay. He gives me enough.

And every once in a while -- these are rare, and they are rare for a reason - every once in a while God pulls the veil way down. And sometimes these encounters with God are more than just life-changing, these can be history changing. We call them “theophanies,” which just means, “God appears,” or “God shows himself,” or “God makes himself visible, for a moment.” Now it’s not that we are seeing the actual body of God - God doesn’t have a body, he is Spirit. It’s that God gives us some physical experience of his presence. God gives us a peek at something that tells us he’s right here.

There are people who study these theophanies. They study theophanies in the Bible, and theophanies in Christian history. And here is what they tell us people experience during a theophany.

- People describe their experience of God as “ineffable.” Which means, it can’t really be described by words; words just don’t work. It’s too powerful, too awesome, too beautiful, too terrifying to put into words.
- And they describe the experience as “awful.” Not the way we usually use the word, but what it used to mean: something that evokes “awe,” or “wonder,” or “stunned amazement.” God is overwhelmingly “awesome,” almost terrifyingly so.
- And they describe how they feel unworthy in his presence.
  - God is so real, so alive, that they feel like a mere wisp in his presence: he is the “living God” - compared to whom we are barely alive at all.
  - And God is so pure, so perfect, that we simply have no right to exist in his presence. He is the “holy God” - compared to whom we are pathetically unholy.
  - And God is so powerful that he is absolutely irresistible. He is the “almighty God” - compared to whom all of us together are completely defenseless. Guys, you’d have an infinitely better chance containing the oceans with a Tinkertoy set than containing God.
- And yet ... these who have encountered God in one of these theophanies describe their experience as intoxicating. As overwhelming as he is, as overpowering as he is, as pure and terrifying as he is - experiencing God is what we were made for. ...

Now ... how does all that apply to Peter, and James, and John, on the mountain with Jesus? We’ll get there, but not quite yet. There are a couple more things we need to know first. There are two other guys who show up for Jesus’ transfiguration. They both had theophanies of their own. First, Moses. We go back to the time of the Exodus: remember Moses, and Pharaoh, and the 10 plagues, and the Red Sea, and all that? And after that the Israelites flee out into the desert? Well the Israelites are out in the Sinai desert now, right after the Exodus, and Moses is up on a mountain where God gives him the ten commandments. And while Moses is up there on the mountain he says something to God that is really kind of stupid. (Ex 33.18) Moses says, “God, show me your

glory.” He might as well have said, “God, please strike me dead!” He says, “Show me who you are, God, show me what you’ve got.” “Pull down the veil, and let me take a peek at you, God.” ... Really?!

And God says to Moses, (Ex 33.22-23) “How about this. What if I hide you deep in the crevice of a rock? And what if I cover your face with my hand? And what if I give you just an inkling of my presence as I pass by? And what if, after I pass by, I take my hand away so you can just catch a glimpse of me as I leave? Because - listen, Moses, listen (this is huge!) ... because, if I show you any more than that, you will die. You see, God says, (Ex 33.20) “No one can see my face and live; no one handle any more of my presence than a guarded glimpse.” Guys, it would be safer to fly into the surface of the sun on a kite than to enter into the presence of God, unguarded. You see, there is this infinite gap between man and God. And God tells Moses, “You can’t take my reality, you can’t endure my holiness, it would destroy you.” Guys, is your God this big? If not, he’s not the real God.

So, God hides Moses in this crevice, and he covers Moses’ face till he is nearly gone. And the experience was still so overwhelming, it says, that Moses’ face kind of like glowed on steroids afterwards, it’s like the dazzling brightness of God’s presence just stuck to his face. His face shined, like light. And it scared the Israelites. So Moses had to put a veil over his face, because the people were afraid him, they were afraid of how his face kept glowing. ... Now, do you think it really happened that way? What if it really did?!

The second “theophany” I want to just glance at was experienced by Elijah, one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. You see, Elijah was up in a cave, on this mountain. And he was spent, and he was broken, and he was scared. His enemies wanted him dead. And somehow he heard God tell him, “Go out and stand before me on the mountain.” And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose ... but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake ... but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Ever been in an earthquake? It will rattle more than your bones! And after the earthquake there was a fire ... but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. That’s so cool! When

Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak - he wraps his face in his cloak -- he covers his eyes; smart guy! Because no one can see the face of God and live; no one handle any more of his presence than a guarded glimpse, right?! So Elijah he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave - with his face wrapped in his cloak.” ... And he heard the voice of God ... and it changed him. ... Moses, and Elijah.

So, back to our story: the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus takes Peter, and John, and James up onto a high mountain to pray. (Luke 9.28) Why Peter, James, and John, and not the rest of his 12 disciples, I don't know? Sometimes it was just these three.

And while he was praying, Luke says, his face just kind of morphed, and his clothes became this intense, dazzlingly white. And when the disciples saw him, they freaked out! No kidding! If you were there, and it really happened that way, you'd freak out too! ... Now I know, we're way more skeptical today. Some of you would be like, “Hologram, maybe? LEDs? Have you ever looked straight into a high powered flashlight when it was flashing - blinding you? Maybe it was something like that! You'd be looking for the wires, wouldn't you? But guys, they didn't have CGI, and holograms, and LEDs and all that back then! Steve Smith, our worship guru, is pretty slick. He could probably make it look like my face was glowing, especially if I tipped my head down and he turned up the lights. But Jesus wasn't using any media tricks. He just starts glowing dazzlingly white. Do you think that would make you wet your pants? ... You see, Jesus is giving them a peek. This is Jesus unveiled, Jesus with his skin peeled back. This is Jesus unadulterated, uncut, unfiltered.

Then it says, (verse 30) that these two dead guys, Moses and Elijah, just ... show up. You know, two guys who had their own “encounters” with the presence of God! And they start talking with Jesus. Why these two? Why not Abraham, or David, or one of the other Old Testament giants. I don't know! Maybe because Moses represented the law to them; and Elijah represented the prophets: Their whole Bible, their whole way of doing life with God. Or maybe because God had used Moses to deliver his people once, and now it was Jesus. And Elijah was supposed to be the one who would come back to prepare the way for God's Messiah. I don't know? For whatever reason these two guys, who kind of

represented the heart of Judaism, these two guys who had been dead for centuries, they are just standing there, right in front of Jesus. Two of the greatest old dead guys ever, just standing there chatting with Jesus ... And Jesus didn't seem the least bit dazzled. Or maybe ... maybe it has something to do with the fact that when they had their own theophanies, centuries before, neither of them were permitted to look into God's face ... or they'd die. And now they are standing right in front of God, face to face with Jesus, looking into the face of God. What a gift!

And I have no idea how Peter, and James, and John recognized them. They didn't have any pictures of Moses and Elijah in their Photo Album on their phones, or on their Wikipedia page. And Facebook was still a few years off. Maybe they wore name badges or something - "Hello! My name is Moses, My name is Elijah." I don't know. Maybe Jesus says, "Moses! Elijah! Been a while!"

And then Peter - remember, Peter was there, and this scene just seared itself into his brain ... And then Peter just gets stupid. Peter says (verse 33), "Jesus! This is great! I can't believe we're here! What if I set up 3 tents somehow?" Now what he was going to build the tents out of, I don't know; I think he's just babbling. He says, "I'll build one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah. It would have been better, I think, for Peter just to shut up and watch! Maybe, maybe Peter was just trying to put Jesus and these two dead guys into a box he could understand. The word for "tent" here is the same word they used for their "tabernacle," where they went to worship God, back in the time of Moses. Maybe Peter is thinking, "If God is showing up, maybe we need a little religion, a little church, a little box to put him in."

Verse 34: But even as he was saying this, a cloud overshadowed them... And now their eyes were really bugging out, because sometimes in the Bible really, really weird clouds meant that God himself was about to show up. "And terror gripped them as the cloud covered them." No kidding. It would scare the bejeezers out of anyone, who was sane!

"Then a voice from the cloud said," ... Now, if you were God, what would you say? If I were God, I think I'd say: "Boo" (just for the fun of it, just to watch them jump). If I were nicer I might say, "Don't be

afraid, guys, I'm not going to hurt you." No, the voice from the cloud says, to Peter, and James, and John, "This is my Son, (This Jesus is) my Chosen One (This is the Messiah; your Savior; your Lord; your God). Listen to him." "I know Jesus just blew your minds with all his talk about having to suffer and die, and what it will cost you to follow him. But this is my Son, you listen to him! You follow him! Wherever he takes you, you go, whatever the cost." To which you would answer, if you were sane, "Yes sir!"

But it goes deeper than that. Here's what happens next. Verse 36: "When the voice finished, Jesus was there alone." Moses and Elijah and gone. Just Jesus standing there. Do you know what God is telling them? God is saying, "Moses and Elijah - that's the old way of coming to God. They are gone now. This is Jesus; this is my Son; this is your Messiah. You listen to him now." "Now," God says, "you come to me through Jesus." And guys, if God the Father calls Jesus the Son my Messiah, my Savior, my Lord, and think I'll go with him!

So, guys ... what if it really happened this way. What if these three eyewitnesses are telling the truth. What if there were no wires, no LEDs, no holograms, no CGI, no fog machines, no hidden speakers, no special effects ... any of which would be a pretty big miracle in itself, 2000 years ago! What if it really happened, just the way Matthew and Mark and Luke, and Peter and James and John said it did ... every one of them willing to die for this Jesus ... most of whom did. It's pretty strong evidence, isn't it, that Jesus really is who claimed to be; what we Jesus followers think he was?

By the way: a couple of takeaways before I wrap this up. Takeaway #1: in one way, this is kind of like one of those previews right before the movie starts. It's a teaser, one of those "coming attractions," a glimpse at what's coming. For a while Jesus looked ... kind of like us. He really did take on one of these bodies when he stepped into our world. But someday every one of us will see Jesus unveiled. And here's what's so cool: 1200 years before Jesus was transfigured, Moses was given a glimpse of the glory of God on Mount Sinai. And God's glory was so dazzling that Moses' face kept shining kind of like the moon reflects the light of the sun. But guys, that's not what happened to Jesus. Jesus didn't glow because he reflected the glory of God, he glowed because he

is the glory of God. His radiance didn't come from the outside, it came from the inside. Jesus pulls down the veil, for just a moment, and we get a peek at who he really is, and it blows our socks off. He is the Son of God, guys!

Here's takeaway #2: When Peter and James and John see the face of God ... they don't die! Jesus didn't hide them in some crevice first, and cover their faces while he dropped his veil. He let them see ... the face of God ... and they don't die. They should have. They were so scared they probably could have. But here's the deal: (listen) through Jesus we can come into the very presence of God and not die. Through Jesus we have access to God, through Jesus we can be touched by God - as powerful as he is, as perfect as he is - and instead of getting what we deserve, we taste grace. Can you imagine what it will feel like to come into God's awesome presence, and instead of being crushed by our unworthiness, we are enveloped by his grace? That's what we experience through Jesus.

Takeaway #3: Guys, Jesus pulled down the veil for a moment, and he showed us that he could go back and forth between heaven and earth ... at will. Jesus didn't have to die to get back to heaven. He could have stepped back into the glory of God any time he wanted. Which means ... guys ... which means that no one forced Jesus to the cross. I means, he chose it. No one forced Jesus to die for us, he chose to. He could have stepped back into the glory of God any time he wanted. Do you think the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers could force themselves on Jesus unveiled! Really?! Guys, Jesus chose the cross ... for us. Does that blow your mind? It ought to.

Takeaway #4 (last one): Guys, do you know what the disciples experienced in this story? ... Worship. They experienced the very heart of worship. They were touched by God. Listen: worship is more than talking about God, it's putting ourselves in a place where we are receptive to his presence. It takes you way past just believing in God. These disciples already believed in Jesus, but here they experienced the presence of God. They got a glimpse of his glory, they experienced the very heart of worship.

Guys, we don't come here just to sing about God, to learn about God, to work for God. We come here, by his invitation, to get a glimpse of his glory, and to be receptive to his presence. It's not enough to do life for him; he invites us to do life with him. We are not here to go through some rituals. We are not here to do enough religion that maybe someday we'll see God. We are here to put ourselves in a place where we are open to experience God, where we are open to his touch. He's here! And he will change your life!

Prayer (Close with: Pour it out; let your love run over; Here and now; Let your glory fill this house)