

## **“A Simple Message from a Complex Story”**

**Matthew 17:1–9**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**February 15, 2026**

In some ways the story of the Transfiguration from Matthew 17 is a bit like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. I realize this may not be obvious but stick with me for a few moments. I confess that I am a Tolkien fan. I am one of those obsessive souls who has even read *The Silmarillion* and enjoyed it, though I understand why the publishers did not concede to Tolkien’s request to release it with *The Rings*. To state the obvious, I am also reasonably well acquainted with the Bible and quite fond of it, including the Gospel According to Matthew. So, I mean no offense on either side of this comparison. I just see similarities.

One of these is a complex narrative world that shapes meaning. Tolkien creates a rich mythic world with all sorts of fascinating beings, some of them magical, as well as exotic places and powerful forces. To make sense of the story, the reader has to hold all these details in mind, imagine characters and territory through which the plot proceeds. It is why some people give up, it’s a lot to invest in; it is worth it, in my opinion, but you don’t necessarily know that when you have to invest.

The Transfiguration story may seem more straightforward, but that’s only because we already know some of the coded language and background that shapes it, namely the Hebrew Bible. In fact, we have read part of this today, a bit of the Biblical *Silmarillion* from Exodus. Some of these details are present in all the Transfiguration narratives, but Matthew underscores them because he presents Jesus as the new Moses, beginning with his Sermon on the Mount.

Moses encountered God on the mountain, had light shine on his face, and brought down divine wisdom from the mountain. Jesus’ experience with three disciples echoes all this, and Moses shows up, along with Elijah, who also had an intimate encounter with God on a mountain. Even Peter’s off-base offer to build three tents echoes the Israelites’ experience of tabernacling with God.

Some scholars view Jesus' experience as superior to that of Moses and Elijah, but it's not necessary to do so. Seeing him in continuity with Jewish tradition has value. Scholars like Bultmann think the Transfiguration is a resurrection story interjected into an early phase of Jesus' ministry, but this isn't necessary either. We can take the story as it is while noting its similarity to resurrection stories.

So, each story is set in a complex narrative world that shapes meaning, but another similarity is that the message amidst all the complexity is quite simple. *The Lord of the Rings* explores the great cosmic struggle between good and evil from which good emerges victorious. There are many twists and turns, in addition to unlikely characters influencing the outcome, but good prevails in the end. The story of Transfiguration tells us who Jesus is — the Son of God — and thus what we should do — listen to him. Simple, straightforward, enhanced by a rich narrative world which shapes it, but still quite clear.

We may think the disciples with Jesus on the mountain — Peter, James, and John — already know who Jesus is and are listening to him, but do they and are they? They might believe he is the Messiah, but they have no idea what kind of Messiah, and when he tries to tell them, they argue with him. Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, only to have Jesus talk about his suffering and death, at which point, Peter rebukes him! And this is just one of many examples of them just not getting it.

These disciples want to know Jesus and follow him, they have left everything to do so, but they are still struggling. This mountaintop experience is designed to help them before they turn more directly toward the cross, and the road becomes even more difficult.

But what does this have to do with us? Well, perhaps it's too obvious. We think we know who Jesus is and try to listen to him and follow his teachings. We're here, after all, unlike most people in this time, but deep down we know we're a lot like the first disciples. We see and don't see who Jesus is. We hear and don't hear his voice. We listen to him at times, truly listen, other times... not so much.

In terms of Jesus' identity, part of the challenge is that there are so many efforts to co-opt Jesus' name for various personal and political

agendas. Kristen Kobes du Mez's book *Jesus and John Wayne*, as well as her lectures here last spring, document some of the more extreme efforts to construct a macho and militant image of Jesus that does not have any serious relationship with the Christ of scripture. But even among those who begin with scripture, there are different perspectives.

Thousands of books have been written about him, dealing with an array of questions such as how humanity and divinity can co-exist in one person. Our own understanding of Jesus is ever evolving, no matter what our confessions of faith are. Indeed, it should be because we never know all there is to know. In this way, Jesus is like The Cat in the Hat. He can always say, "But that is not all I can do, no, no, that is not all!"

So, embracing Jesus' identity is an ongoing challenge, and how we see him shapes our capacity to listen to him, but many things hinder our listening. Quite often we're just too distracted. We live in a noisy and chaotic world, and it's not just the outside world that is the problem, it's what's inside our minds. Even while sitting in this space set aside for worship, how focused are we in this very moment?

Someone is preaching, it happens to be me, and we may be trying to listen, but how do we quiet all the thoughts of our minds — concerns about things we have to do today, some interaction we have been chewing on, the fear of where a sermon might be going or the assumption that we already know where it is going? All this noise hinders our ability to listen to what is said.

And sometimes, we just don't want to listen. I remember a time when my mother thought my father had a hearing problem. So, she pushed and pushed and finally he agreed to have his hearing tested. The doctor came back with news my mother enjoyed. He said, "Your hearing is fine. Your problem is that you just don't listen."

Spouses sometimes don't listen to each other because they don't want to listen. Children sometimes don't listen to parents because they don't like what their parents are saying— they want to stay up late. Puppies sometimes don't listen to their human companions because they don't like what they are saying— they want to keep chewing on the cabinet doorknob. As Esther de Waal points out in her book *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, the word "obedience" is derived from the

Latin *oboedire* which shares its roots with *audire* which means “to hear.” So, listening involves obeying or acting on what we hear (p. 43).

Sometimes we don’t listen because we don’t want to act on what is said.

This gets to the heart of the issue with listening to Jesus. The first disciples don’t listen to him when they don’t like what he is saying or when what he says doesn’t fit the framework of how they understand faith, God, and the work of a Messiah. We have the same challenge.

If we think of Jesus as being meek and mild, we have trouble hearing his words about righteousness and truth. If we think Jesus comes simply to bring salvation to individual sinners like us through his death and resurrection, we have trouble hearing his calling to pursue justice and deliver the oppressed. If we linger over Jesus’ insistence that he comes not to do away with the law but to fulfill it, we may struggle with his radical acceptance of sinners and outcasts. If we cherish his welcome of all, we may struggle to take seriously his call to repentance, for people to change, to deny self, take up a cross, and follow him.

In short, whatever our assumptions about faith are, and whatever our ideation, including our political ideation, is, we tend to filter our understandings of who Jesus is and what he can say and thus tune in or tune out certain messages. We all do this to some extent.

So, how can we do better? How can we learn to see more clearly who Jesus is and listen more faithfully to what he says? One thing the story of Transfiguration tells us is that mountaintop experiences help. They don’t have to be on literal mountains. The key is that we experience the presence of God in some intimate way, hear the Divine voice speaking to us and for us, catch a glimpse of Christ that is personal and transforming. Reading about and hearing about Jesus is one thing. Encountering the Risen Christ in a personal way is quite another.

I have shared with some of you a story Episcopal priest Morton Kelsey included in his book *Reaching*. He had been in ministry for some time but started having unsettling dreams which his counselor Max Zeller, a German Jew and Jungian analyst, helped him interpret. In one dream, Kelsey entered the church to lead a service but couldn’t find his vestments. Then, he couldn’t find his sermon notes or his place in the

prayer book, and when he turned to face the congregation, he saw that a dead tree had fallen through the nave of the church, and thus he wondered how the ushers could collect the offering (p. 24).

Zeller helped Kelsey recognize the source of his anxiety, the fact that he talked to people about faith all the time but only on the basis of academic study, not personal experience with the Holy. Zeller then guided him toward a more authentic faith based in experience.

We can't orchestrate experiences with God, but we can be open to them and pay attention. Kesley encountered God in dreams, some of us find journaling helpful, others sense the Holy amidst service to others; but wherever we have these encounters, we learn something that is difficult to dismiss, and we learn who is speaking to us. This made a difference for Peter, James, and John, and it can do so for us.

We can also hold on to what we experience on the mountaintop. In C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, Aslan explains to his friends that he has spoken to them on the mountain clearly, in ways he hadn't in Narnia. On the mountain, the air was clear, as were their minds, but in Narnia the air would thicken. So, he counseled them to remember what they learned on the mountain and know it by heart (pp. 25-26). We cannot stay on the mountain, but we can hold on to what we learn there, consider any claim about Jesus in light of what we know personally.

Then, in addition to having personal experiences with Christ, and remembering what we learn through them, we can compare anything we sense with what is recorded in scripture, all of it, not just a few isolated verses which support our biases, and then test it out with other believers.

We may not have many indisputable facts about Jesus, but we have a lot of data, the whole of scripture and nearly 2,000 years of people seeking to understand him, however imperfectly. How does what we sense square with what is in the Bible, what others have sensed over the years, what other believers here and now think? Genuine faith is deeply personal, but it is also tested in community, with other seekers of truth.

The story is complex, but the message is simple, if not exactly easy. This is who Jesus is, God's Son, the Beloved, and we are called to listen to him, really listen, whether we like what he says or not.