From Sinai to Tabor

On the Transfigured Face That Becomes Our Own

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Salt, Light, and the Vocation We Were Given

One of the songs we sang this morning had a refrain: *Day Star, shine down on me; let your love shine through me.* That carried directly into what was being prayed for in this service: that whatever the Father has shared with the Son might now be the same thing flowing among the disciples *after* the Son has left, so that we reflect him into the world.

And that takes us straight into the Sermon on the Mount:

> You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13–16)

Israel had been called out of Egypt for exactly this. They were delivered, brought to Mount Sinai, and there the Lord said to them, *you are a peculiar people, chosen out of all the earth to represent me. The whole earth is mine, but you have a job. You have a vocation.* Sometimes in a moment of privilege we forget that the privilege came with a job attached. We

start to think the privilege was *deserved*. But the privilege God has given is to *demonstrate*, even in suffering, that God is able to work inside a people who will not despair.

And I want to be honest with you: you may *go through* despair. You will go through times of hand-wringing. The world is full of trouble and heartbreak. Every one of our lives could testify, at some point or another, to having been brokenhearted. *But*, and this is the glory, when the Lazaruses of our lives have died, when the people we love have been *blind from birth* or struck with whatever malady fills in the blank for you, *God is there to be glorified in all of those events*.

It is not easy. People talk about the *stages of grief*; I have *stages of trusting God*. The first stage is usually, *this isn't a big deal; I'll handle this myself*. The second stage is when it has progressed to a full-blown dumpster fire. The third stage, for me, is finally arriving at: *Okay, God, I am out of options.* And the strange thing is, *I feel so much better* after I get to *out of options*. Even when the circumstance has not yet changed, something happens inside me, and I think, *why didn't I start there in the first place?*

Thank God for Community

My wife has a way of cutting through it. When I am wallowing in doom, despair, agony on me (deep dark depression, excessive misery) she will sometimes say, you know what my pastor says . . . And I'll cut her off and say, Yes, I know what your pastor says.

And *that* is exactly why we need community. There are moments when you need someone outside yourself to say, *think about this for a minute*. Not to be critical of you in your despair. But to say, *I've been there too, and let me testify of how God has delivered me*. That kind of word, from outside our own head, is what gets us out of the place we are stuck in.

And it is more than help in despair. It is also help in *vocation*. After Jesus tells the disciples that they are salt and light, he draws an unsettling line:

"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

An older brother said it well not long ago: *this is not a commandment religion*. We have been given commands. We have been given insights. But we were meant to take them up and extrapolate through *love* how they apply in every situation of our lives, not to fixate woodenly on a single command and think, *Got it. Box checked.*

"What Do I yet Lack?"

Look at the rich young ruler in Matthew 19. He runs up to Jesus full of enthusiasm: Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? (Matthew 19:16). Jesus answers him in his own register: If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments. The young man asks which? And Jesus walks him through the second table (you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother) and then adds a phrase from outside the Decalogue: and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 19:18–19, citing Leviticus 19:18 alongside Exodus 20).

The young man says, *All these things I have kept from my youth*. And then he asks the question only a commandment-keeper can ask:

"What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:20).

If you have a commandment faith, if you think this whole thing can be managed by being a good little boy or a good little girl, *you are going to grow up disappointed in yourself*. You are going to grow up and say, *God, why did I step into that hole? I knew it was there. I stepped in it*

anyway. That is not because God has not called us to righteousness. It is because the righteousness God calls us to is not the kind that can be reduced to a check-list.

Jesus goes right at the young ruler's actual god. *Sell what you have, give to the poor, and come follow me.* The young man could have argued with him if Jesus had simply said *you love your money too much*. But the command-related man could not argue with the *command*. He went away sorrowful, because he had many possessions (Matthew 19:22). The commandment that exposed his idol was the very kind of contextual command he was not prepared for. *God is calling us to a righteousness that cannot be reduced to black and white.* It is contextual. It responds to the actual moment. And it is exactly when dumpster fires occur, when fear and uncertainty and doubt and anxiety come against us, that this kind of contextual righteousness is summoned.

We are about to have a wedding. And we are going to say things like *for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse*. That is not just between husband and wife. That is also our walk with God. There will be sickness and health. Poverty and wealth. Times when our hearts are tempted toward other gods, and God is wooing us back, saying, *I'm the one who brought you to the dance. Stay with me.*

Upon This Rock

And it is in this context, in Matthew 16, that Jesus asks the question that defines the church:

> "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" . . . He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you

that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:13, 15–18)

The Greek word translated *church* is *ekklesia*: the *gathering*, the *assembly*. And the promise attached to it is staggering: *the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.* Lord, you are talking about battles we do not yet know are coming. You are forbidding the gates of hell to prevail against the church you are building.

And it is when *we* find ourselves saying with Peter, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,* when we recognize that the love Jesus demonstrated on the earth is the love that will *reshape the world,* that the assembly begins to do what assemblies of this kind can do. The faith that says *be removed and be cast into the sea* is *earth-reshaping* faith. Things change in our lives because of what God has given us. As Paul says:

". . . the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5).

Rivers Out of the Belly

And what gets poured *in* does not stay in. Look at John 7. Jesus is at the great final feast of harvest, the Feast of Tabernacles, on its *last* and most solemn day. The land has been dry and dusty all summer. The priests are bringing water up the steps of the temple, ritually reenacting the prophecy of Ezekiel 47: that one day water would flow out from the threshold of the temple and become a river through the land, bringing life where there was death. The priests are pouring the water on the steps. The mood is solemn. And right in the middle of it, Jesus *yells out*:

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37–38).

Imagine the disruption. In the middle of the most solemn ceremony of the year, someone shouting out *come to Me*. Talk about wrecking everyone's good time. (I know how disturbing it can be when a service is interrupted by an unexpected voice.) But what Jesus is doing is moving the *source* of the river from the temple steps onto himself. *If anyone thirsts, come to Me.* And then he moves the river one step further: *out of his belly* (that is, out of the *believer*) *rivers of living water shall flow*. The water you drink from him does not stop with you. It pours through you and out.

That glory shared between the Father and the Son: *that* glory gets transmitted into us, and then it flows. *Rivers out of the belly.* And if a single individual can become a river, *imagine the torrent when a community of people come together*. Not even the gates of hell can prevail against a people who are trusting their God and pouring out the living water they have first drunk. That is what an *ekklesia* is for. That is what the salt and the light of Matthew 5 actually look like. The community that drinks and then flows; that is the city set on a hill that cannot be hidden.

The Two Shining Faces

Now let me show you something that I have come to love about how Scripture works. Hold open Exodus 34 next to Matthew 17.

In Exodus, Israel has just come off the rails. They have built the golden calf. Moses has shattered the first set of tablets. He goes back up the mountain, gets a fresh set, and comes down:

> Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:29–30)

Moses' face *shines* from his encounter with God. Then the very next chapter:

"Then Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said to them, 'These are the words which the Lord has commanded you to do'" (Exodus 35:1).

The Hebrew word for *gathered the congregation* is rendered in the Greek Septuagint with the verb *ekklēsiazō*, the verb form of *ekklesia*. Moses *ekklesia-ed* the people. *That is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 16 when he says, I will build my ekklesia.* The assembly of Israel at the foot of Sinai is being deliberately echoed by the *new* assembly Jesus is gathering.

And what happened at Sinai? Moses went up to God. God's glory manifested on Moses' face. Moses came down with the commands and delivered them to the people. The people, having just fallen into idolatry, *turned* and received the commands again.

Now watch Matthew 17:

> Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. (Matthew 17:1–2)

His face shone like the sun. The exact echo of Moses. Jesus has already gathered his ekklesia. He has already told them, in Matthew 5, *you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world*. And now, on a *high mountain*, Sinai resonance again, *his face shines*. The Moses pattern is being fulfilled in a higher key.

But here is the critical move. How do we become the light of the world Jesus called us to be in Matthew 5? It is because he came down off this mountain transfigured, and his transfiguration becomes our transfiguration. Sinai's shining face was on Moses alone, and the people had to veil themselves from his glory. Tabor's shining face is on Christ, and the Spirit pours it through him into us. Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are being

transformed into the same image from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). The face that shone like the sun is the face we now bear.

The Transfigured People

And then watch what Jesus does after he comes down off the mountain of transfiguration. He does not give the disciples a fresh set of stone tablets. *He gives them a series of contextual situations* in Matthew 18 through 20, each of which asks: *what does the transfigured ekklesia look like, here, in this specific human situation?*

Children (Matthew 18). The disciples ask who is greatest in the kingdom? and Jesus sets a child in their midst and says: Be humble like this child. Remove stumbling blocks from children. Take care of the little ones. The transfigured people protect the small.

The lost (Matthew 18:10–14). The parable of the lost sheep. *Pursue the one who has wandered.* The transfigured people go after the missing.

Forgiveness between brothers (Matthew 18:15–35). *How many times shall I forgive my brother? Up to seven?*: *I do not say seven, but seventy-seven*. An infinite bucket of forgiving love, ready to give over even before it is asked for. The transfigured people forgive without ledger.

Marriage and divorce (Matthew 19:1–12). The same forgiving love that frames sibling relationships is applied to spouses. The deepest covenant relationship is held in the same charity.

Children blessed (Matthew 19:13–15). When parents bring little children to Jesus and the disciples try to forbid them, Jesus rebukes the disciples: *Let the little children come to Me*. The transfigured people remove the gate-keeping.

Wealth (Matthew 19:16–30). The rich young ruler. How do we handle money and possessions?, do not love your riches; let them go for the sake of the kingdom. The transfigured people are not held by their possessions.

Power and ambition (Matthew 20). The laborers in the vineyard, the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Many who are first will be last and the last first; whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant. The transfigured people invert the world's ladder.

Do you see what Jesus is doing? Moses came down with commands. Jesus comes down with a transfigured face, and then walks his disciples through every category of human relationship and asks what the shining face looks like in each one. The righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is not a longer list of commands. It is the same face shining through a transfigured people in every relational context they enter.

Bless on the Way to the Cross

And I want to pause on a single moment that has been on my mind. Jesus has already said in Matthew 16, *I am going to Jerusalem to die*. He is burdened. He is on his way to the cross. And in Matthew 19, *some parents bring their little children to him*. The disciples (sensible men, sensitive to the weight on their Master) try to forbid them: *Sir, He's on His way to Jerusalem. He doesn't have time for this.* And Jesus says:

"Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

In the middle of his own grief, in the middle of his own walk to the cross, *Jesus stops to bless the children*. That is what the transfigured face does. In the middle of our suffering, in the middle of our trouble, if we can take a moment to bless someone else, we are fulfilling what God

called us to fulfill. To glorify God is to live that contextual righteousness, to keep blessing on the way to the cross.

I will be honest. When I am in my own pain, when I am petting my self-pity, when I have retreated into discouragement with myself, I do not want to come up here and do *any* of this. There is an old internet image of a man saying, *I'm not going to church today. I hate those people and those people hate me.* And his wife says, *You have to go. You're the pastor.* I have felt that. I have come in here on Sunday mornings already discouraged with my own self, fallen into my own pits, and tried to pray myself back into the service. And the Lord helps me, *when I try to help someone else*. When I get out of myself and think about you, the Lord helps me. The same is true for the musicians. The same is true for anyone who speaks or serves in this place. The same is true for the people who send a text message that says *thinking about you today, praying for you today*. There is an infinite number of ministries running through a congregation, and *when we get out of ourselves to serve others, God meets us*. The shining face comes back.

Coda: Sown Down

Let me close with a brief word about what has been on my mind from a recent week of travel. *God is working in such a marvelous, subtle way in this world that people do not know he has sown down his word around them*. I had five or six different experiences in another country recently that made me realize how widely the seed has been sown. And what was striking was this: *the people who have been sown down with God's word do not even know they have been sown down with it*. They do not know yet that the seed is in the soil. They do not know yet that the harvest is coming. But God knows.

Rivers out of the belly. Light on the city set on a hill. Salt that has not lost its savor. The same face that shone on Tabor, shining out through the transfigured ekklesia in every relational

context we enter, and the people we encounter, *who do not yet know that the seed has been planted in them*, beginning to feel the first stirring of the harvest. *The gates of Hades shall not prevail.* The living water is already running.