

Transfiguration Sunday

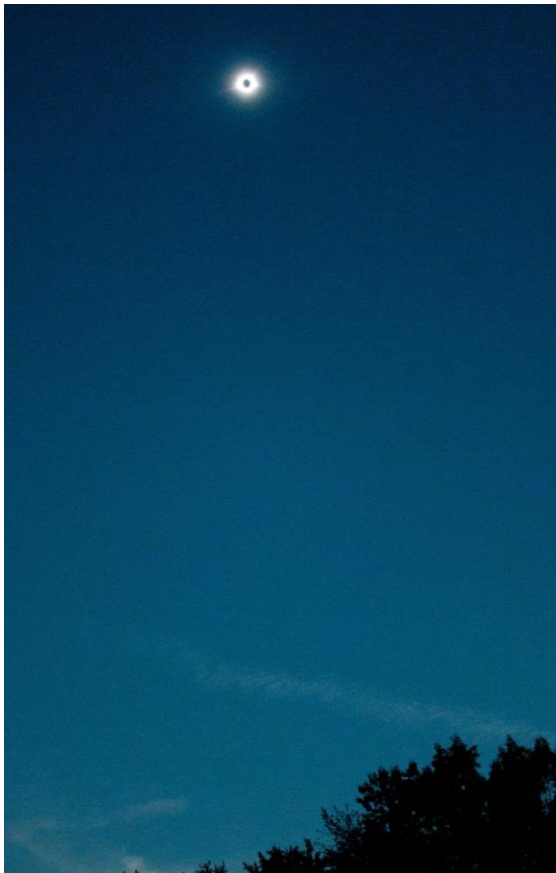
February 19, 2023

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

Matthew 17:1–9

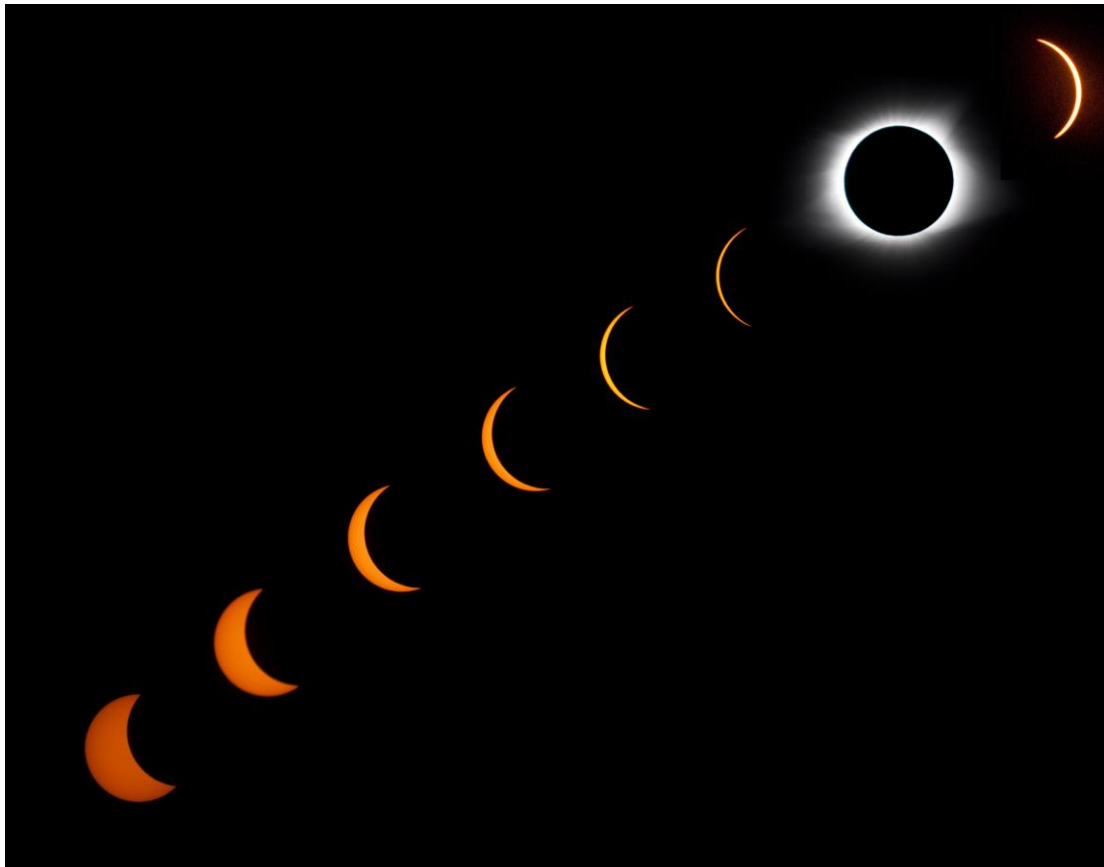
“A Fleeting Vision”

1. On August 21, 2017, Tracy, the boys and I packed up the van and headed south on I-65 in search of a full solar eclipse.
 - a. It was a perfect day for it, not a cloud in the sky.
 - b. We intended to go to a town in Tennessee because it was the closest town in our general area where we could experience the longest possible time of the sun being eclipsed.
 - c. Traffic was heavy on I-65 heading south, I assume it was made worse by eclipse chasers.
 - d. As we drove, the eclipse had already started (but it wasn't total yet) when we decided to get off the highway earlier than planned, at Franklin Kentucky, just past Bowling Green
 - e. We stopped at a Baptist church, whose large parking lot had an unobstructed view of the skies.
 - i. Seven or eight other vehicles were there already, and people were setting up for the big event.



- ii. We were ready. We had the right sunglasses for watching the eclipse.
- ii. We had lawn chairs, tables and food.
- v. I had my digital camera, tripod, zoom with a special filter to photograph the eclipse safely and even my video camera.
- f. As soon as I got set up, I started taking pictures. Michael was shooting video. The whole thing was surreal.
- i. And when the moment came, when the moon finally was going to obscure the entirety of the sun, things shifted.
- ii. The light of the sun had been dimming noticeably, and then it became like the darkness of dusk.
- ii. I took this picture which gives a good idea of how dark it had gotten even though it was midday.
- v. It was exhilarating. You could hear people just going “wow” .
- g. I knew we would have about two and a half minutes of this miracle, of this eclipse. I wanted it to last longer.

- i. And then slowly it started to get brighter, as the moon kept traveling on its path, and the sun was able to shine more and more on this little patch of southern Kentucky.
- ii. Days later I made this photo composite on Photoshop
 1. using pictures I took as the sun was getting more and more eclipsed by the moon, until it was fully obscured
 2. (the color of the sun in the pictures to the right is orange because my camera had a filter for the partial eclipse pictures, and then the picture of the fully eclipsed sun has no filter – you can look at the fully eclipsed sun with the naked eye).



- h. It was a day I will never forget. And God willing, we'll experience another full solar eclipse right here in Columbus, without having to drive anywhere.
 - i. Buy your special sunglasses and mark your calendars for Monday April 8, 2024 at 3:06 PM EDT, when we will have 3 minutes 44 seconds of the total eclipse right here in our back yards.
 2. The Gospel passage we read today is about a mysterious, fleeting vision we refer to as The Transfiguration.
 - a. The passage made me think of our experience with the solar eclipse because, like the eclipse, the Transfiguration is this fleeting moment people wanted to last

longer, and it felt like an incredibly special thing had happened, even a transformational thing

- b. This story marks kind of a continental divide in the gospel
 - i. Like the disciples climbing to the top, we as the audience of the gospel have been climbing up with Jesus, learning more and more about him, getting to know him
 - ii. Once we reach this mountain top, however, from here on out, it's clear that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem
 - iii. The introduction of the story even included the fact that Jesus had JUST told the disciples he would undergo great suffering and be killed in Jerusalem
- c. In our story, Jesus does something which he did often: he sought secluded places to go pray
 - i. He brings with him Peter, James and John (three of the four original disciples)
 - ii. He doesn't warn them about what would happen
 - iii. When they get to the summit, Jesus undergoes a transformation
 - 1. Here of course words fail the gospel writer and preachers ever since
 - 2. The best the writer can give us is that *"he was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light."*
 - 3. I think of it like a moment where the glory of God was clearly visible to them
 - 4. Jesus, who is fully human and fully God, here gave a glimpse at his divinity
 - iv. In this retelling, the disciples are transfixed, focused. They're taking all in, when suddenly, cameo appearances by two greats of the faith: Moses and Elijah
 - 1. It's a curious vision, but one which seems to be connecting the dots for the disciples and for us
 - 2. This Jesus and his message are the continuation of the law which came as Moses met with God also up on a mountain, and the prophetic justice message of Elijah
 - v. Peter wants this moment to last forever. Who wouldn't?
 - vi. But then a cloud full of light (more light than Jesus was shining!) eclipses the scene, and a voice from heaven removes any doubt anyone may have had:
 - vii. *"This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"*
 - viii. That terrifies the disciples, who crumble to the ground and cower in fear

- ix. Jesus kneels next to them, pats them on the shoulder and tells them not to be afraid
 - x. When they look up, all is back to normal. The magical moment is gone.
 - xi. The experience would replay in their minds, however.
 - xii. Jesus asks them to wait until after the resurrection to share the story with others, and they seem happy to comply since their heads were still swimming in the mystery of the moment.
- d. In trying to understand who Jesus really was, then, now that they had seen him transfigured and heard God's voice, they could well have recalled the passage we read today from Leviticus, something they would have been familiar with
- i. It is one of several summaries of the law which Moses had shared with the people
 - ii. Be holy as God is holy, it begins, because God wants God's people to be set aside for a specific purpose (that's what holy means)
 - iii. And the purpose of humanity is to be a blessing to each other and their community and to be dedicated to God
 - iv. Listen to him, God had told them from the cloud. Literally listen but also meaning "understand him"
- <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g191/kiv/tr/0-1/>
3. Some of you may have seen a new TV ad campaign which kind of sneaks up on you. You may have seen it during the Super Bowl.
- a. The campaign has several ads, with modern scenes of refugees, of people fighting and struggling, of a dinner party where some refused to come, and then the message flips our perception on its head and proclaims: "Jesus was a refugee" "Jesus was a rebel" "Jesus turned the other cheek" "Jesus welcomed all to the table"
 - b. The tag line is memorable: Jesus gets us. He gets us.
 - c. I want to be clear that on the surface the ads are effective at reframing Jesus to a modern audience, in particular to young people with a heart for social justice.
 - d. Unfortunately, there are some troubling backstories to the whole campaign
 - i. I'd be glad to share some articles digging deeper at the origins of this campaign and critiquing it (in fact, I shared one from Sojourners already),
 - ii. but to summarize here what I'd say is
 - 1. The campaign stops short of a call to action to be the rebel Jesus was, or challenge the power structures as Jesus did
 - 2. The campaign wants us to fall in love with Jesus, but not quite to risk it all to break barriers, or to be fully inclusive of all people as he was
 - iii. For as much as we marvel that Jesus gets us, and he does, we're a long ways from getting who Jesus is. A long ways to fully follow his example. Do as he did. Truly to listen to him.

- e. Connecting the dots of who Jesus was, who Moses was, who Elijah was cannot leave us simply as spectators.
 - f. If we get Jesus, then we follow his radical example.
 - g. If we get Jesus, then we question and stand up against injustice
 - h. If we get Jesus, then we can't stand still when the powerful tell us to stay in our lane
4. The Transfiguration is that fleeting moment of heaven bursting open, of catching a glimpse of who Jesus is, fully. It is also the beginning of the road to Jerusalem, to the cross. It is the beginning of growing conflict with authorities, of disciples falling by the wayside because they thought they understood Jesus but didn't. It is the beginning of it being harder and harder to follow where Jesus was going. But he never gave up on us. He gets us. He wants us to get him, too.

<https://sojo.net/articles/what-he-gets-us-ads-get-wrong-about-jesus?fbclid=IwAR0CamOpvcNoDCS35eYILttXpXaWqNtJKm73refc5w9GeFbpig15NP9CWcl>

https://secondnexus.com/he-gets-us-ad-campaign?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2QfGFq6Aa9kCvByLajCPYvF4iko8pUPGn54IASbTkjyr5RQsj3BDLZa5o#Echobox=1676335803

<https://www.eclipsewise.com/solar/SEnews/TSE2017/TSE2017states/TSE2017stateKY.html>

<https://nationaleclipse.com/maps.html>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/transfiguration-4/commentary-on-matthew-1624-178-2>

Reflection questions

1. Imagine a person who has absolutely no knowledge of the Bible asks you to describe or explain Jesus. How would you respond?
2. What stands out to you the most from the story of the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1–9?
3. What is one thing you've read Jesus teach about or shown by example which is hard for us to follow? Why?