



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Transfiguration
February 19, 2023

New Testament Sinai

Matthew 17:1-9

¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

The divinity of Christ seems at first to be a doctrinal fantasy – something too unbelievable to be true – so much so that many churches in our day have given it up. Some even go so far as to say that Jesus was *not* God and that He never claimed to be, which we know from Scripture to be false. Jesus *did* claim to be God, and He proved it.

Those of us who accept the doctrine of Christ’s divinity, as the Bible teaches it, as Luther certainly believed it, and as our church has taught it from the beginning, [we] seem to be able to lay aside our critical human reasoning and accept as true things we cannot prove. Those who do not accept the divinity of Christ reject it because they reject *any* idea they consider to be unprovable according to human standards.

It might surprise us, then, to note that the biblical doctrine of the deity of Christ is not directed against atheists, who don’t believe there’s a God, but rather against the so-called “religious” people, who worship many gods. In the face of this naive and convenient proliferation of gods, the Bible insists that the one true God is only to be found in Jesus Christ. God is not found at shrines, He’s not found somewhere out in nature. No, the Old Testament prophets insisted that God was to be found in His temple. The New Testament echoes the same thought when it says that God is not to be found in Greek or Roman idols, in the magnificent power of the emperor, in human aesthetic and artistic feeling, or in human intellectual abilities. No! God is found only in Christ! This doctrine of the divinity of Christ is spoken against the superstitious lie that we can find God wherever we want in whatever way we want. Anytime we try to find God where we want to, in the way that we want to, we don’t ultimately find God; we find an idol whose beady little eyes resemble those of his father, Satan, the father of lies, the enemy of God, who seeks to destroy us.



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God is not the pawn of our religious *feelings*. God is found only where He reveals Himself, on His terms, not ours.

God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and continues to reveal Himself to us in His Word. Beloved, the truth of Christ is not some concoction of our own feeling or experience. Just as you and I are not figments of somebody else's creative genius, God is what and who He is by virtue of Himself. He comes to us on His terms alone, giving us life, sustaining us, bringing us forgiveness, grace, and purpose for our lives. The doctrine of the divinity of Christ bids us to reject worldly superstitions and religions structures, which are not founded on the biblical doctrine of Christ.

The appearance of God on Mt. Sinai in the Book of Exodus might seem superstitious to the modern mind: thunder, lightning, and an earthquake were perceived by the people as signs of God's awesome presence. Moses goes up the mountain and is hidden by a cloud, which they understand as another symbol of God's presence. The cloud envelops the mountain for six days and on the seventh day God speaks out of the cloud and the voice of God gives Moses not only the Ten Commandments, but also instructions for building the tabernacle. The same awesome presence that communicated with Moses on that mountain would later make His dwelling in the tabernacle.

Now, if I told you that each bolt of lightning and clap of thunder was a communication from God, you might think I was being superstitious, and, perhaps, a little bit flaky. And, if I told you that each time the earth shakes God is speaking to me, you'd think I'd come more than a little bit unglued. But, we have to realize what this vision of God was meant to combat. After 400 years of living in their culture, the Hebrews had become accustomed to the gods of Egypt. Remember: they couldn't resist the temptation to build a golden calf and worship it as the god who brought them out of bondage. Now they were to see that the true God was the One on Mt Sinai. He was not like the gods of the Egyptians. He was not a god any of the Hebrews could make for themselves. Though He came to them on the mountain, He was not the mountain. Though He spoke to them from the cloud, He was not the cloud. He's not part of the created world. The God of Israel was the Creator of this world and clearly separated Himself from the superstitious religions of the day.

With this background in mind, let's turn to the account of our Lord's transfiguration in today's Gospel. It, too, at first reading, sounds like a fantasy contrived to appeal to fanatics who revel in strange religious experiences. Just the opposite is true. When Matthew recorded this event, he was contending with those who claimed to have had special visions and insight. And Peter, who was there that day, interestingly points out that the doctrine of the Christian church is not based on cleverly devised myths or legends, but upon real events witnessed by real people who simply proclaimed what they had seen and heard.



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The Greeks endeavored to find God in their own philosophical insight. The Romans sought God in the orgies of their particular mythology. The Jews strove to carry out every detail of their cultic temple worship. Where did the early Christians find God? Not in the various religiosities of the day, but in the Person of Jesus. And *that* is the message of the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration of Christ is the Mt. Sinai of the New Testament. It even bears a formal resemblance to Moses' encounter with God. Our Lord calls His trusted followers up a mountain, as God called Moses. Our Lord's face shone as did His Father's on Mt. Sinai. The Father speaks to His Son from a cloud as He did to Moses. And who appears with Jesus to complete the connection? Moses! Perhaps Peter recognized the similarity when he suggested that they build dwelling places there for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, just as God had instructed Moses in the building of His dwelling place all those years before.

This was the answer of the New Testament to Greek philosophy, Roman mythology, and Jewish legalism: God was to be found in Christ and Christ alone. The charge is made in our day that Jesus is no longer the only way to heaven, that He, in fact, should be done away with, because, when you hold to the teachings of Jesus, you must reject all other religions. This, they say, is elitism, that we Christians look down our noses at other world religions, that we, because of our ethnic and religious backgrounds, make the assertion that we are better, smarter, and more correct than anyone else. Rubbish!

My friends, we are not the originators of this rejection of other religions. God began it with the very first commandment: You shall have no other gods. Why? Because there *aren't any!* There is only one God. And He sent His Son to be our Savior. The Transfiguration is the highest protest against the polytheism, pantheism, and idolatry of misguided religion. We're not following cleverly devised myths about God. He's not a super human. He's not a glorious cloud. He's not confined to any particular building. God is in Christ; this is the only God there is. The only true God is the One who in Christ offered the sacrifice for our sins, and forgives and accepts us through that sacrifice – not through some system of merits and demerits, but according to His grace and mercy.

Where do we find this Christ? Where do we find God? We find Him, not from our own personal ideas about Him, or our personal experience with Him. We find Him in the Scriptures. This is not to say that we don't *have* personal experience or personal understanding, we do. But, we do not base our religion on experience. We base it on God's Word, the record of His coming to us in Christ. It's also in His Word that we find the record of His continued coming to us in the same person as we celebrate His Supper. This is Christ's presence in our midst. He really is with us in the Word that's read, He's really with us in the bread and wine, He's really with us in the waters of Baptism. He's really working among us through the pastors He's called; and through you, as you love and forgive one another according to His Word, for we are members of His body, and He is our Head.

At Sinai, God came in the cloud. On the Mount of Transfiguration, He came as the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Today, that same God-Man comes to us, offering that same body



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and blood given and shed for us on the cross. When we understand God's presence dwelling with us in the Lord's Supper, we will not fall prey to superstitious beliefs, for the God we have is not of our making, but has come to remake us. We come here, not to nourish our own image of God, but to be nourished by the one true God, so that we might be remade in His image. We come here, not to find God by our searching, but because we've been found by Him and made members of His family. We are the children, beloved, not of some made-up superstition, but of the Creator of the universe, who has revealed Himself once again to us today in the Person of His Son. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen