

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, transitioning from the Season of Epiphany to the Season of Lent in the church year. On this day, we are starting the Lenten Sermon Series called "Perspective" for the purpose of transfiguring the set of our lenses or our conventional viewpoints during Lent. Today, we begin with our perspective on pretense.

Since today is Transfiguration Sunday, let me start today's message with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. We can find this story in the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36). This story is not in the Gospel of John. In this story, Jesus went up to a mountain to pray with three of His disciples—Peter, James, and John. These disciples saw Jesus meeting two dead prophets on the mountain—Moses and Elijah. They also saw Jesus' face and clothes becoming dazzlingly bright. Because Jesus' appearance changed and became glorious, this story is conventionally taken as the story of Jesus' transfiguration. After seeing this change, Peter said, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5).

If any of you have ever sat through more than a handful of sermons on Jesus' transfiguration, or endured even a couple of mine, then chances are you already know how the preaching from this point usually goes. From there, preaching on the Transfiguration usually goes in one of two ways.

- (1) The first would be that discipleship isn't about adoring glory or mountaintop experiences; no, it's about going back down the mountain, where we can feed the hungry and clothe the naked.
- (2) Another direction of the message from Jesus' transfiguration story would focus on Peter and ask people to identify with Peter—a foolish, imperfect follower who fails at his faith as often as he gets it right. And, yet, Jesus loves him and builds His church on him.

That's how Jesus' transfiguration story is usually preached: go back down the mountain, back into 'real life.' Or, look at Peter—he's just like us.

By now, some of you might wonder what I am trying to say here with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Well, as today's message title has given you a hint, today's message is about pretense. By its definition, pretense means "an attempt

to make something that is not the case appear true." It is a claim, especially a false or ambitious one.

As I grow in my knowledge of God by reading the Bible more and more, and living the life God has given me continuously, adding more experiences to my life and broadening up my understanding of God, I realize that these two directions of the interpretation of Jesus' transfiguration story are the pretense of the Biblical interpretation. None of these interpretations are biblical, even though all of them are good ones. The story of Jesus' transfiguration in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke says nothing about going back down the mountaintop, back into 'real life,' or looking at Peter—he's just like us. No, the Bible does not say anything about that. You may check this out if you prefer by reading Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10, and Luke 9:28-36 by yourself.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration is about affirming Jesus' "SON-ship"—S.O.N.—and endorsing Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah, the Christ. This story in Matthew, Mark, and Luke all says that a voice came from the cloud, saying, "This [Jesus] is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). This affirmation sounds familiar to many of us, right? This is the same affirmation we've heard at Jesus' baptism before Jesus starts His public ministry. Just before Jesus walks the passion journey, here we have another affirmation of Jesus being God's Son, the Messiah, the Christ.

Just before starting our Lenten Journey today, the message of today's scripture challenges us to live from a place of authenticity rather than the hypocritical pretense of outward religion. Lent is a time to take off our masks and come as we are. Donald Hagner, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, says that the word for hypocrites in Greek (ὕποκριται) was the word for "actor" in Hellenistic Greek, "one who performs in front of others, pretending to be something he or she is not."¹

Jesus observes. He watches the movement of the "religious actors" in the streets and the synagogues. He can discern the bogus from the bonafide expressions of devotion. Jesus can distinguish what is genuine from what is fake. He rips apart any misconceptions about religious practices and their impulses in His teaching on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

¹ Hagner, D. A. (1993). *Word Biblical Commentary Matthew 1-13* (Vol. 33a). Thomas Nelson. 139.

It is an actor who sounds the trumpets when their coins fall into the temple baskets. It is an actor who stands in the middle of the streets and an assembly, volubly proclaiming their pronouncements to God for all to hear. It is an actor who disfigures their face so all might see the painful distortion of their face. It is an actor who does not read the Bible but preaches and teaches the Bible based on their assumptions. The hypocritical actors, experts at pretense, make themselves appear to be something they are not so that they might gain the approval and praise of the community. Jesus says that those who stage this outward religion have received their reward, the praise of the crowd.

This pretense or acting does not please God, the Bible says. God desires us to express our love for God sincerely and genuinely. As we will begin the Season of Lent, the season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, this coming Ash Wednesday, I am encouraging us to do some self-examination by pondering the questions I am providing today. These questions are:

- (1) What is it that our hearts treasure?
- (2) What motivates us to act religiously and devoutly? Is it duty, approval, guilt, to please people, or something else other than God?
- (3) What masks do we wear on the stage of life that obscure our true intentions?
- (4) What might it look like to enter the secret places of devotion that bring pleasure to God, to take off our masks and come as we are expectantly devoted to the God who gives us light and life, with the entirety of heart, soul, and might?

Let us always be true to ourselves in the presence of the Lord and others, starting today and in the days to come. Amen.