

New Year; New You 7) Completely Confident

Matthew 17:1-9 • 2020-02-23 • Epiphany Series: New Year, New You



Dare I ask how long it took for you to get ready this morning? I don't mean just waking up and eating breakfast. I mean getting yourself suitably presentable to leave the house. How much time does it take to shave the beard, comb the hair or put on make-up and pick out the correct clothes for the occasion? And how embarrassed would you be if your shirt tag was sticking out or your hair was standing up funny? Everyone takes some time each day making themselves presentable -some more than others. Where does your confidence to face each day come from? Perhaps for all of us some degree of confidence comes from our appearance. But today we see that our confidence for facing each day comes from something far different than what we do after digging in a closet. We finish our series, "New Year; New You" with a reminder that we are completely confident in Christ.

Jesus had no reason to derive any confidence from his appearance. The Scriptures don't really give us much for a description of him. We can't even say if he was either tall or short. As far as his features and appearance we only know that he would have had a beard of some sort. In 2001 a forensic anthropologist Richard Neave set out to figure out what Jesus might have looked like. Neave had worked on facial reconstruction for crime fighting. His reconstruction for Jesus' face used archeological evidence such as skulls from first century Jewish men. He also studied portraits and descriptions of men from ancient Israel. His depiction of Jesus is very different from the usual artwork you might have seen. Neave inferred from studies of the culture that Jesus did not have long hair. Neave's depiction got rid of the curly princess buttercup hair often seen on paintings of Jesus. Neave's depiction of the ancient Jewish man Jesus had nothing unique. He made Jesus very ordinary in appearance. And that's fitting. The closest description we have of the person of Jesus is found in Isaiah's prophecy which says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Is 53) In appearance Jesus was "undesirable." He wasn't tall or outstanding but so very ordinary looking that Judas had to identify and distinguish Jesus for those who came to arrest him. You could say by human standards his appearance was at best plain, perhaps what some at the time would call ugly.

The disciples weren't drawn to Jesus by his appearance. But they had seen the ordinary, undesirable Jesus change water into wine. They had seen miracles that caused them to marvel as he calmed the raging storm and drove out demons. And they heard his powerful, life-giving words. They knew that they were with no ordinary man. Just six days before they went up this mountain Jesus asked them an all-important question. "Who do you say I am?" Peter and the rest looked beyond the surface and replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." They didn't see someone glorious, but they were confident Jesus was someone glorious.

After over thirty years of veiling his glory by taking on flesh and remaining lowly, he then gave a brief glimpse of something more. There is one only place in the new Testament which describes Jesus' personal appearance as a man. And its right here. Jesus took three of his disciples to a quiet place high up a mountain alone. Suddenly when they looked at Jesus his appearance changed. They saw a glimpse of him for who he really is. Not just the ordinary human being who did extraordinary things. But the man who himself is extraordinary. All three synoptic gospels seem to struggle to describe just how he appeared. Matthew notes, "His face was shining like the sun, and his clothes were like light."

As if seeing Jesus shining bright in glory wasn't enough, they saw two very prominent men with him. Moses and Elijah, great leaders and prophets from Israel's past were speaking with Jesus. Peter doesn't know how to respond to such glory and just stutters, "Lord, it is good to be here! If you wish I will put up three tabernacles..." Then, having seen his glory they were then surrounded by a bright and glorious cloud, the glory of the Lord. Then they not only saw but heard about the glory as God the Father spoke, "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him." Matthew records that at seeing and hearing all this glory the disciples were face down in great fear. Any bit of self-confidence they had was altogether gone. They threw their faces to the dirt and trembled!

Is our experience with Jesus any less glorious? You and I might not be walking with the Word made flesh, but we have and hold the Word of God. Do you and I always view it with such glory? Or do we get lost in the ordinary way it is revealed to us? Does that make the Word any less extraordinary and divine? And no, we aren't walking with Jesus up a mountain to pray. We aren't personally invited to a prayer rally led by Christ himself with Moses and Elijah joining in attendance and God the Father speaking directly from heaven as the keynote speaker for the day. But is it any less extraordinary when we read the Word of God recorded by Moses and listen to what he did through Elijah? Is it any less extraordinary when the speaker is saying, "This is the word of the Lord," and when we read the Scriptures together in worship? We might not be enveloped in a mysterious cloud of the presence and glory of the Lord when we gather for worship. But what is any more glorious than the presence of Christ who says, "Wherever two or three gather together in my name I am with them." We worship with Jesus! We serve together with him! And though the bread and wine seem so ordinary do we partake of his supper with awestruck marvel? "His body and blood are given for me here!" Ought we not to be like Peter, James, and John and tremble at such things? Ought we not to be so sober minded that we recognize we are in the presence of God right now? Just as it often was for the disciples, Jesus' glory is hidden, but it is real. If we were to fully grasp his glory wouldn't we need to fall in great fear with our faces to the ground?

But Jesus' greatest glory is seen in something other than this bright vision. It is seen in Jesus' lowliness. The next thing that those three experienced after seeing and hearing God was this: Jesus touched them. It wasn't in anger. It wasn't in wrath. It wasn't in his holiness to destroy. It was just the familiar man Jesus, the "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" man. That familiar lowly hand touched them, and they heard him speak, "Get up. Don't be afraid." That is our source of confidence! Though we ought to tremble in fear in the presence of a holy God, he veils his great glory and comes to us in the most familiar of ways. Why? To say to us, "Get up. Don't be afraid."

Brothers and sisters of our glorious Lord Jesus. See when Jesus shines the brightest? He veils his divine majesty and says to the sinner who is unfit to serve him, "Get up. Don't be afraid." Together the disciples and Jesus walked down the mountain. As Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time he said, "Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." He wasn't just referring to a bright appearance and display of power. He was speaking of his suffering and death. The face that once showed its divine radiance would be struck. Blood would flow as the fists beat him and the whips struck him. His garments which shone like light would be gambled over by the soldiers. That would be the only thing they saw of any value when they saw this broken, beaten man. There is a little more in Scripture that describes Jesus' appearance for us. "There were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness." (Is 52:14) Crucifixion, which Jesus had plainly spoke of in the past six days, was his lot. It is a method of execution which so distorts the human body that the Messiah would cry through the prophetic word, "My bones are all out of joint." Wasn't this Jesus' brightest glory? He lowered himself. Though he is the only Son of God and enjoyed glory with the Father and Spirit from eternity, he gave himself up for us. He took on lowly appearance and form so that he could take our place and die for every sinner on the cross.

Peter would later declare "we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" and John would write "we have seen, heard, touched...(Jesus) who is light and ... who purifies us from all sin." (1 John 1) He veiled his glory so that he could take our place in suffering and death. That's why the apostle Paul noted "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:8)

Jesus did not change in appearance on the mountain to frighten or intimidate his disciples. He changed in appearance to build up their confidence for the days ahead. Can you imagine them after this frightening sight and sound to feel Jesus touch them and hear him say, "Don't be afraid"? That's got to be life changing! Instead of just, "Lord, I can do this! Let me serve you when things are going well. Let me be part of the congregational life if there are no hiccups. Lord, let me be a tent builder if it means being a part of something glorious." We can follow like James who despite seeing this glory was the first of Jesus' disciples to die for following him. And like Peter we can speak up to encourage suffering believers around us, "We have seen his glory."

Jesus never needed to change in order to intimidate and drive others to fear. He's God. No one could ever even approach his throne without fainting in fear. No one can see him and live. Jesus could only change by veiling his glory. His change was when he took on human flesh and lived so lowly and ordinary. God from eternity stepped into time and became fully human. And his change wasn't to drive to fear, it was to remove our fears. He wants all his disciples to understand that he veiled his glory so that he could say to fearful sinners, "Get up. Don't be afraid." His humble life and death have brought us peace and removes all fear of whatever we might face in this world.

This glimpse of glory no doubt changed these disciples! Our glimpse of his glory also changes us. We see the Savior who now invites us to serve him without fear. "Get up." That means taking up our crosses. That means going to face persecution, hardship, opposition and false teaching. It means being a Christian father even when there are many bumps and rough days. It means being someone willing to carry a cross so that you can further point to Jesus—suffering, illness, lowliness. We are indeed glorious. There is more than meets the eye to the Christian. It's a new you, filled with confidence because of who Jesus is. But like Christ we live lowly and await the glory to come.

There's one more picture of Jesus which is after his resurrection. It's a vision. The brightest moment is what the glorious Jesus says at the end. Many years later, after facing false teachers, lies, persecution, and exile, the disciple John sees Jesus once again in glory. John shared a glorious vision of Jesus who rose again from death and now lives forever glorified. John depicts Jesus as he is now. We are confident now because it is also the glorious Jesus who touches us and tells us "Don't be afraid." John wrote, "... I saw someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters... His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid.'" (Revelation 1)

"Get up. Don't be afraid." We live in full confidence in him. We have seen his glory and we will see him in glory. It's the same old glorious Jesus we have always known, but it's a new you.