

THREE CURTAINS

MATTHEW 17:1-9

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We've all seen the headlines:

- Father of five gives birth to triplets
- Family on vacation abducted by UFO
- Incredible new diet lets you lose 50 pounds in two weeks
- Eleven-year-old girl lays chicken eggs. Doctors are astonished.

These are the headlines that glare at us from the checkout stands at the supermarket. For some they provide comic relief as one waits in line with their cart of groceries. For others, they put the newspaper in their cart so they can continue the story at home.

I don't think too many people buy the tabloids thinking that they contain serious news. Few if any, of us take these stories seriously. Rather, they are light-hearted entertainment.

Add one more headline to the list: "Trio of religious students see their teacher transformed into blazing light."

What about this story? Is it like the others? Just hearing the headline, it would seem to come from the same tabloid as the stories of men giving birth or children laying eggs. Yet this is the headline from our Gospel text today.

We have been taught and trained to be skeptical of anything that doesn't make sense. We pride ourselves on our logic and our ability to reason. That is why we can

chuckle at the tabloids. That is why many also chuckle at faith and Christianity.

While most of us chuckle at the tabloids, there are those people who are able to suspend their intellect and read the stories as fact. Children often fit into this category—and who is to say that they are wrong? Who is to say that our skeptical, doubtful, rational thoughts are always right?

Faith is a curtain. To many, it does not make sense. Many people claim to have known too many religious hypocrites to ever believe. Others doubt the miracles or the stories, or Jesus' resurrection. Many of these people view faith as tabloids. Our story of the transfiguration is just one more story to laugh at.

Yet, when we walk through the curtain to the other side, when we are born anew into faith, then it no longer seems ridiculous why someone would trust in God. Rather the ridiculous and illogical thing seems to be why one would not believe in God. Depending on which side of the curtain we stand, determines whether faith is real or a hoax—whether faith is important or ridiculous.

The story of the transfiguration is also a curtain. It is not told in the Bible to feed our doubts or raise our sense of skepticism. It is told by Matthew to remove our doubts. One the one side, it is an unbelievable story; on the other, it becomes God's comfort to quite our doubts.

The story comes just after Jesus telling his followers that he will die. It must have been hard for them to hear this news; perhaps too hard for them to even accept. They are thinking, that if Jesus is to die, then he cannot be the Messiah. This prediction of his death causes them to question all that they have thought. They wonder if they have been duped? Have they been following a religious

fraud artist? How can Jesus' life and ministry be a success if he is about to die?

And so it is that Matthew places the story of the Transfiguration immediately following his revelation of his death. The disciples—discouraged, skeptical, and doubtful—follow Jesus up a high mountain and there at the top they see this remarkable vision. It is not a vision of doubt, but of glory. It is in this event that they discover the other side of the curtain. Their faith is confirmed and restored; crucifixion comes to mean success and not failure.

You see, crucifixion is a third curtain. From one side, all we can see is a senseless cruel death of an innocent man. All we see are good ideas and intentions that have failed and evaporated into nothingness. But when God reveals the other side of the curtain, we see that the death of Jesus means freedom and victory. On one side there is sadness and defeat; on the other success and glory.

This event gave them the courage to follow the same road as Jesus—the road to death. The transfiguration story does not plant doubt; it overcomes it.

After it is all over, “they looked up, and they saw no one except Jesus.” Was it reality or a dream? Of course, it was real and now that it was all over, they saw in front of them all that they needed. All they saw was Jesus. What more did they need? Their doubts were gone—at least for now. If doubt ever returned, I'm sure that either they were reminded of that day on the mountain, or else God provided new answers to fresh concerns. But for now, all they needed to see was Jesus standing right in front of them.

To read this story without faith, it is an incredible story. It stirs up doubts and seems unbelievable.

To hear this story with faith also sounds incredible, but for a different reason. It convinces us of Jesus identity and empowers us to move forward in life knowing that there is another side to the curtain of faith and the curtain of Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is a story from the pages of history. How does it remove our doubt?

To answer that question, we need to realize that Transfiguration isn't just an event that happened long ago to three men. Transfiguring events also happen to us today. It may come in different ways: the birth of a child, gazing on the vastness of the Milky Way on a clear night, through the loving act of a stranger, or in seeing God work to bring peace to a warring world or even our little corner of the world.

Transfiguring events happen all the time every day all around us and we can recognize them if we stand on the right side of the curtain of faith. But no matter how they come, God continually works to remove the doubts that plague our faith. He works to show us the other side of the curtain. He opens our eyes to see that what the world takes for granted isn't always the way things are. He reveals that through suffering and hardship, His love brings glory. Those views—no matter how brief—are just small tokens of the reality we will experience in the last days when God finally rips the curtain in two.