

Sermon notes by Rev Jenn Garavito, associate pastor Brunswick Baptist Church

Guest preacher, 15th February 2026. Online Service

Lectionary:

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts/?y=17134&z=e&d=23>

Bible reading:

Matthew 17: 1-9

Sermon

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Today, we will explore the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew.

The way we will approach this story is by looking at the world behind the text, understanding why the author of Matthew chose to describe this significant divine event in this particular way.

I know that for some people, there is the idea that the only voice we hear from the Bible is God's, right?

But, in reality, the human voice is also present.

The communities behind the text were wrestling with how to connect their faith to everyday life.

So, let's try to understand what was happening in the Hellenistic context of that time and how the wisdom of this story can speak to us today, and also how it can help us to prepare for lent.

We will do a postcolonial reading and from the theology of liberation perspective as well.

We know that God's word gives us life and strength to embrace the present with thanksgiving and to look to the future with hope that restores us.

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The World Behind the Text:

As we know, throughout human history, various imperial powers have risen.

In the context of the early Church, that imperial power was Rome. We are dealing with the Roman imperial rule, Jewish resistance, and the tensions between the colonial oppressors and the oppressed people.

1. Roman Imperial Rule:

Judea was under Roman rule.

Rome exercised political and military control over Jewish territories, forcing people to live under colonial domination.

This often led to resentment, as the local Jewish population lived under a foreign oppressor who controlled their land, taxes, and religious practices.

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2. Jewish Resistance to Roman Rule:

These different Jewish groups expected a Messiah who would liberate them from Roman oppression.

We know that these ancient Jewish groups had different prophetic, apocalyptic, and messianic views. Therefore, their interpretations of how God would deliver them from Roman oppression led to different outcomes.

For example, the Zealots were nationalists waiting for a political liberator. However, the Transfiguration of Jesus challenged this image and illustrated the deep glory and authority of God above any earthly empire.

The presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration is also significant because it connects Jesus to Israel's most prominent figures.

Moses, the lawgiver, represents the Torah and Israel's covenant identity, while Elijah, the prophet, symbolises the hope for the restoration of Israel.

So, the author of Matthew is telling his readers that Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish messianic promises, but not in the way they expected.

Instead, Jesus embodies a theological challenge to the worldly powers that dominate and oppress.

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3. The Tensions of Empire, and Religion:

These communities were not only struggling under Roman imperial rule but also facing internal divisions about how to respond to this oppression.

Some Jews, like **the Sadducees**, were more willing to accommodate Roman rule in exchange for maintaining their social and religious status.

Others, like **the Pharisees**, sought to maintain strict religious purity and oppose Roman influence.

There were also revolutionary groups, like **the Zealots**, who sought to overthrow Roman control through violent means.

When I reflect on how these ancient Jewish communities responded to their contextual challenges, it reminds me of our modern Church.

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The different ways the Church responds to contemporary challenges:

Some by hardening their religious purity and condemning the rest of the world, others by raising their voices and standing in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised, some offering hospitality, and others aligning with political powers to maintain their status.

I think this invites us to pause and reflect on how we respond to the new things God is doing in our midst.

It calls for an ethical and humble response, but also, before any action or word is spoken, it requires an honest listening to God's presence in us and among us, being still, and connecting with God with an open and humble heart.

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Currently, we (BBC) are creating space to strengthen and build connections with the Latin community in Melbourne. It is called Latin Renew Wellbeing.

Some of the challenges immigrants from Latin America face include loneliness, language barriers, anxiety due to uncertainty about visas, and a lack of meaningful relationships.

My experience as an immigrant has shown me that nurturing our spirituality in a community that loves and makes you feel a part of it, while holding an image of a God who walks with you, loves you, and accepts you as you are, is significant!

However, many Latin Americans are very suspicious of the church. Unfortunately, the church in general has failed to serve the people of God with integrity and humility.

We started three years ago, and my heart is full of joy and gratitude as I witness the goodness of God in the midst of our life together. Not only building healthy relationships among Latin people but also with the church community too.

To give some examples: Spanish learning group, volunteering at the different programs at church, and even Latin people are coming to our services.

Today, we have a Bible reading group where people ask questions many times, difficult ones, and I believe we do well to listen carefully to those questions.

We do well to acknowledge that the church needs to repent for its wrongdoings, listen to God, and continue walking with humility in the direction of becoming the church we are called to be today.

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On the other hand, a **postcolonial reading** of this wonderful story tells us that the mountain where the Transfiguration takes place is not just a geographical location but a symbol of divine sovereignty over any empire.

In the Old Testament, the most significant divine revelations that challenge human authority occur on mountains places where God reveals His redemptive plan as well.

For example, Mount Sinai with Moses or Mount Horeb with Elijah.

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Therefore, a postcolonial reading of the Transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew has much wisdom for us today.

It critiques any colonial ideology of domination, any abuse of power that denies human dignity, and any harm against nature and animals.

God's power, revealed in Jesus, does not lie in coercive, violent, or imperial control exercised by earthly empires but in the transforming glory that Jesus brings offering an alternative vision of justice, liberation, and peace.

This story also carries a wonderful message of hope for unity and reconciliation, which is much needed in today's world of hatred and division.

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The presence of both Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration of Jesus symbolises a unity between different faith traditions (Judaism and Christianity).

In a world torn apart by religious and cultural divisions, the Transfiguration invites us to find common ground and strive for unity, reconciliation, and peace.

Therefore, I find the theology of liberation reading compelling!

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I don't know if you've heard of the **Theology of Liberation that emerged in South America** in the 20th century. It developed within the Roman Catholic Church as a response to widespread poverty, systemic inequality, and political oppression under military dictatorships.

Elsa Tamez, a wonderful scholar from Mexico, has done great work in the Book of Matthew from a liberation theology perspective.

What struck me in the reading of the Transfiguration story is that it reminds us that the Transfiguration occurs after Jesus has begun teaching about the Kingdom of God and calling people to radically change their relationship with power.

Jesus' physical appearance is transformed, His face shines like the sun, and His clothes become dazzling white.

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This symbolises the nature of God's Kingdom. In the context of Liberation Theology, the concept of glory is directly linked to solidarity with the poor and marginalised.

Jesus' glory in the Transfiguration foreshadows His passion and resurrection, showing that true glory comes through self-emptying love, not through domination.

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The presence of Moses and Elijah represents the struggle for liberation.

Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, and his presence evokes the theme of liberation from oppression.

Elijah, on the other hand, represents the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power, denouncing injustice, and calling the people back to God's liberating vision.

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The Voice from the Cloud:

The voice from the cloud declares, "**This is my Son, the Beloved; with Him, I am well pleased; listen to Him!**" (**Matthew 17:5**).

In Liberation Theology, this command to "**listen to Him**" is a powerful call to follow Jesus' example of solidarity with the oppressed and His teaching about a new Kingdom based on justice, equality, and love.

The cloud also reminds us of God's presence with those who are suffering, a promise that God will never abandon them, even in their darkest moments.

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The Disciples' Fear and Jesus' Assurance:

The disciples' reaction, of falling to the ground in fear represents the human condition when confronted with the divine mystery.

However, Jesus' words, "**Get up and do not be afraid**," assure us that liberation is possible and that God's love will overcome fear and oppression.

I find the words of Jesus, "**Get up and do not be afraid**," so affirming.

They remind us that our fears and struggles are not greater than us, and by no means, do they define who we are!

We are loved, we are enough, and wherever we go, God is with us, breathing in our lungs and hearts the love and grace we need to embrace God's calling to participate in His good vision and care for us and this wonderful planet we call home.

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Dear Church, as we prepare our hearts for Lent, let this week's Ash Wednesday remind us that we come from the earth and will return to it.

As we conclude our reflection today, I invite you to read the story of the Transfiguration again this week to give us strength as we enter into the lent preparation to walk alongside Jesus' passion towards the cross, and his resurrection.

It's an opportunity to examine our hearts and minds, allowing the words of Jesus "**Get up and do not be afraid**," to speak to our fears and challenges

I also invite you to join with many other followers of Jesus, not just in our midst or in Melbourne, but around the world, as they reflect during Lent on how systems of oppression are normalised today, whether through colonial legacies, economic exploitation, or religious intolerance.

Let us unite in prayer for leaders who embrace God's vision for our world today.

A world longing for peace, justice, and liberation for the poor, including the liberation of our dear planet from human greed.

Amen.