

## “Three Pictures of Jesus”

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A Reflection for Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 16.13-17.9

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If you're reading this online, you can see the Scripture selections  
[by clicking here.](#)

This morning's readings from Matthew's Gospel give us three different pictures of Jesus. Let's look at them. Each is different. Which do you prefer?

I

First picture: the Warrior Messiah.

Jesus asks what folks have been saying about him. His disciples share the gossip. Then Jesus focuses the question: *Who do you say I am?*

It races out of Simon's mouth: *“Messiah!”*

Sick of the way things are? Beaten down and fed up? Rejoice! The Messiah-King will march into the house, throw evil out the window, and renovate everything with peace, justice, and joy. The Messiah-King will set a fine table where the holy will feast and the righteous will drink, all who were never welcomed before. God's glory and power and majesty will shine once again and forever. Hallelujah! Amen!

You can hear Simon's wheels turning. *The Messiah is going into battle, and he will win. Jesus, I'm with you all the way. March on Jerusalem. Take on the powers. With you, Messiah Jesus, we will not be stopped. The crowds will hail your arrival. You will set things right. You will be crowned king and raised high on your throne.*

Simon gets it! God shows him. Simon sees, and Jesus rewards his seeing. *“You are blessed, Simon. You are Rock, Peter! (Petros means “rock” in Greek.) On you I will build my church, my Messiah-Community. Not even Hell will knock it over. I give you, Peter, power and authority.”*

Picture one, the Warrior Messiah. Peter loves it. It is the good news of Jesus.

II

Picture two?

Peter would rip it down. He can't believe it. Jesus keeps talking, and now it's about suffering, being rejected, killed.

Again, you can hear Peter's wheels turning. *If this campaign is heading to victory, you cannot be going on like this, Jesus. It crushes morale. It's terrible for recruitment. Stay on*

*message.<sup>1</sup> Enough of this defeat talk.*

Obviously Jesus is having a crisis of confidence. So Peter the Rock pulls his Messiah aside. *You're not about suffering but success. You don't get killed. You win!*

Jesus turns to Peter. (I expect to thank him for the pep talk.)

*"Get behind me . . . Satan!"*

That word, *satan*, it means accuser, adversary, opponent. There is "the Satan," and then all sorts of regular, ordinary, everyday adversaries, opponents, and hurlers of accusation. The Satan has already tried to pull Jesus away from God's way. Now it is Peter whispering temptation in Jesus ears.

Picture one was fantastic for Peter. Picture two is disastrous.

Still, it is the good news of Jesus. The victory of the Warrior Messiah will come as the crowds turn away from him, as his followers flee from him, as his own betrays him, as even the Rock denies knowing him. His crown will be thorns, his throne a cross. His defeat, will be his great victory for everything.

### III

Jesus captivates me. He has found me, claimed me, embraced me, forgiven me, and called me to a new life in him and with others. He is my all, my everything.

Still, I struggle picturing him.

I was sick in bed for a couple days this week. So I watched a new series on Netflix, called *Messiah*.<sup>2</sup> Basically, it's about a guy who suddenly shows up, first in war ravaged Syria, then on the tense border with Israel, then in Jerusalem, then in a tornado-ravaged town in Texas, then in Washington DC. He does amazing things. People begin calling him *al-Masih* ("messiah" in Arabic). But he won't fit with what people expect of him.

This confusion is what people felt about Jesus. Not least, his own disciples. His first disciples. His Peter-Rock disciple. And us.

Stanley Hauerwas is a theologian who digs to the heart of things. Here's what he says:  
*. . . Peter, full of the newfound power that Jesus has given him, rebukes Jesus. He on who the church is to be built, . . . [presumes] to know better than God what God desires. This is a sobering beginning for the church, but*

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<sup>1</sup> In an analogy to politics, Stanley Hauerwas observes that Peter is trying to get Jesus back "on message." *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p. 151f.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah\\_\(American\\_TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_(American_TV_series))

*one to be imitated countless times throughout the church's life.*<sup>3</sup>

What picture do we want Jesus to sit for? I know what I want Jesus to be. I am sure of what he needs to be. Yet, time and again, he won't sit still for my picture. He goes outside the lines. He even ignores the frame. I can easily fall into that trap alongside Peter, assuming to know better than Jesus does.

I finished the first season of *Messiah*. Who is he? It's more confused than ever. I can't wait for season two.

#### IV

Peter has to wait six days, for picture three.

I imagine it has been a hard week. Tense. Chilly. Confused. Troubled. Jesus Messiah, going to suffer and die, and saying "Follow me."

They follow Jesus up the mountain. Three of them: brothers James and John, and Peter.

At the top, they see. Jesus, his face blazed and his clothes lighted. That's how they described it later. I doubt their description comes even close. No words can. Not even our best imaginations. There is nothing like him. No one.

Later, people called this "The Transfiguration." It's when they see who he really is.

*Jesus Messiah.  
The only Son of God.  
Eternally begotten of the Father.  
God from God.  
Light from Light.  
True God from true God.  
Of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
Became truly human for us and our salvation.  
To be crucified.  
To suffer death.  
To rise.  
To reign.  
To judge.  
To complete all things.*<sup>4</sup>

They see Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> Hauerwas, 152.

<sup>4</sup> I've adapted this from the Nicene Creed.

They see Moses too; he stands for God's Torah, the Law of life. They see Elijah, standing for God's prophets. These two great "reveallers" of God, speak with Jesus. And the Voice says, "*Listen to him! My Son, whom I dearly love and who delights me.*"

They hear. They see. Even Simon, whom Jesus called a "satan," Peter the rock.

V

Which picture do you prefer?

The Warrior Messiah, who defeats evil and brings true justice? I imagine if someone has their foot on your throat — and for so many people, that is life — then good news is when someone pushes them off.

The Suffering Saviour, who meets violence with forgiveness, rejection with invitation, and death with resurrection?

The Transfigured Lord, majestic, glorious and divine?

You don't have to choose.

Jesus is all three. For you. For me. For everyone. For all things.

For Peter too.

Amen.