

“Sneak Previews”

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

There was a time when the highest praise a new movie could receive was “Two Thumbs Up.” It was the signature review of *Sneak Previews*, a program that aired for many years that starred two movie critics from Chicago, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert. Siskel and Ebert worked for rival newspapers in Chicago and were also bitter rivals personally, and that rivalry often led to heated arguments that became a feature of their program that began as a local television show and eventually was broadcast nationally. The format of the program featured the two critics presenting short clips of movies in current release and debating the merits of each film, energetically defending their remarks when the other critic agreed. Siskel and Ebert would summarize their review by simply indicating whether a movie received a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” rating, which soon became a popular catchphrase and would be featured in advertisements for films that received their coveted “thumbs up.”

The program’s name *Sneak Previews* was borrowed from a regular part of the movie-going experience, the Coming Attractions that often run before the feature presentation. For many moviegoers, these coming attractions gave them a sneak peek at movies that would be released soon; the previews could go on for several minutes before the main feature began. It gave many movie fans their first glimpse at a new movie whose release may have been announced, but the coming attraction also gave viewers a peak at what they could expect when the movie was finally released. Sneak previews were shown to build interest and to wet the appetites of movie fans so that they would return to the theatre when the coming attraction was available to the public.

Sneak previews can be experienced in many other places beyond movie theatres. In an age when many people watch movies on various streaming services such as Netflix, sneak previews are often shown on YouTube or other online platforms. Many novels will include a sneak preview of a new work by the same author to give readers a peek at what will soon be published. The networks who broadcast the Super Bowl often show a sneak preview of a new show that they hope will become a hit. Many sports teams will offer sneak previews when they are unveiling new uniforms or introducing new players for their upcoming season. Sneak previews

give viewers a glimpse into the future, a clue as to what they may be able to anticipate with excitement until the full movie or production is revealed.

While I am not aware of the phrase “sneak previews” appearing anywhere in the Bible, Scripture is filled with references to what will be occurring in the future as it gives God’s people a glimpse into what God will reveal in the fullness of time. The writings of God’s prophets often speak of times when God will accomplish what has been promised, when the Lord will bring to fruition what can be seen only in part in the present:

- “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” – Isaiah 43:18-19.
- “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Jacob.” – Jeremiah 31:31.
- “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be my prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.” – Ezekiel 34:23-24.

As we conclude this season after Epiphany in which we have been invited to consider the identity of the one who was visited by the Magi who “*knelt down and paid him homage*” (Matthew 2:11), we are offered a “sneak preview” as to the fullness of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth on the day of his transfiguration, when our Lord “*took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves*” (Matthew 17:1). Mountains were often places of divine revelation in the Bible where God revealed the fullness of God’s glory to God’s people (as when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai: “*There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.*” – Exodus 3:2). The three disciples were among the first person Jesus had invited to “*follow me, and I will make you fish for people*” (4:19), and they will be the three disciples Jesus will invite to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion (“*He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated*” – 26:37). When they arrive at the top of the mountain, “*he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white*” (17:2). In this “metamorphosis” (*metamorphoomai*), Jesus reveals the fullness of his divine nature, affirming Peter’s earlier confession that “*you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (16:16). It is a glimpse at Jesus’ identity as the one who is “*fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity*” (*Small Catechism*) as well as a sneak preview of the glory of our Lord when he is resurrected from the dead and ascends into heaven, where he

is “seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” (Nicene Creed). In the disciples’ vision, Jesus glows with a transcendent glory reserved for heavenly beings, an anticipatory revelation of Jesus as belonging to the divine world (“*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.*” – 13:43). Jesus’ transfiguration recalls Moses’ shining face when he came down from Mount Sinai (“*Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.*” – Exodus 34:29). But while Moses’ face shone because it reflected the divine glory he had seen, Jesus’ face shines with his own glory, “*the glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14). Jesus possesses the glory that Moses saw, “*for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*” (Colossians 2:9).

As the disciples are trying to comprehend the amazing sight they are beholding, “*suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.*” (17:3). By portraying Moses, Elijah and Jesus as talking together in a scene of transcendent glory, Matthew confirms his view that Jesus is in continuity with and the fulfillment of God’s work as represented in the Old Testament (“*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’*” – 1:23; Isaiah 7:14). Moses and Elijah are paired because they were both prophets who were mutually rejected by the people but vindicated by God, both were advocates of the covenant and the Torah, both worked miracles, and both were considered by first-century Judaism to be transcendent figures who did not die but were taken directly to heaven. “*They thus represent the heavenly world of divine vindication, the world to which, in Matthew’s post-Easter perspective, Jesus also belongs.*” (M. Eugene Boring). Both Moses and Elijah were associated with Jewish hopes for the future, from the return of Elijah to the coming of a “prophet like Moses”:

- “Lo, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” – Malachi 4:5-6.
- “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your people; you shall heed such a prophet.” – Deuteronomy 18:15.

The presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain of transfiguration “*signifies that the entire Old Testament bears witness to his messianic mission that will culminate in the cross.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Peter responds to the revelation and speaks as a believer, but without complete insight, still placing Jesus in the category of prophets. Peter proposes that if Jesus desires “*I will make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*” (17:4). These “dwellings” (*skenai*, “tabernacles, huts”) may refer to the Feast of Tabernacles in which the Israelites dwelt in makeshift tents for seven days, commemorating how God’s present dwelled in the tent of meeting and how the Israelites dwelled in tents as they journeyed through the wilderness:

- “You shall live in booths for seven days, all that are citizens of Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.” – Leviticus 23:42-43.

The Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*) also pointed to future fulfillment, anticipating the time when the nations would come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord as King in an eschatological Feast of Tabernacles (“*Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths.*” – Zechariah 14:16).

While Peter is still speaking, the heavenly cloud of God’s presence appears, as on the tabernacle in Moses’ day and later at the Temple in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, God’s presence was often manifested in the form of a cloud in the wilderness and in the sanctuary in Jerusalem:

- “The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.” – Exodus 13:21.
- “And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.” – 1 Kings 8:10-11.

Out of the cloud speaks the voice of the Lord, and the God who had previously spoken only to Moses now speaks to the disciples. The heavenly voice speaks the same words as at Jesus’ baptism (3:17), confirming the identity and mission of Jesus declared on the banks of the Jordan as well as in the confession of Peter (16:16). The words from the baptism are accompanied by a command: “*Listen to him!*” (17:5). As in the *shema*, the confession of faith that calls upon the people to “*hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone*” (Deuteronomy 6:4), “hear” carries the Old Testament connotation of “obey,” the same command given to the manner in which they are to receive the words of the “prophet like Moses”: “*you*

shall heed such a prophet" (18:15). As Isaiah had spoken of a day when the Lord would create "*a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of flaming fire by night ... over all the glory there will be a canopy*" (Isaiah 4:5), God now fulfills this promise as "*Peter, James, and John witnessed the fulfillment of these prophetic hopes when the 'bright cloud cast a shadow over them' on the mountain of transfiguration*" (Mitch and Sri).

Upon hearing the heavenly voice, the disciples "*fell to the ground and were overcome by fear*" (17:6), a typical response in the Old Testament to being in the presence of God ("*Then I heard the sound of his words, and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground*" – Daniel 10:9). But they do not remain in this state of fear for long, for "*Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid'*" (17:7). When they raise their heads from the ground, the disciples discover that Moses and Elijah have disappeared; "*they saw no one except Jesus himself alone*" (17:8). Without heavenly companions, without heavenly glory, Jesus is now the "tabernacle," the reality of God's abiding presence among God's people; "*Jesus alone remains to complete the word of redemption that these two Old Testament figures have foreshadowed.*" (Mitch and Sri). As Jesus leads Peter, James and John down the mountain, he orders them to "*tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead*" (17:9). Jesus' mention of his resurrection indicates that it can only be understood from the post-Easter perspective of Matthew's readers who know that Easter only comes after Good Friday, that there can be no resurrection without crucifixion. Jesus commands the disciples to tell no one about the vision, which before the resurrection might lead to further misunderstandings.

The three disciples who were offered a "sneak preview" of the glory that they would experience in the resurrection of Jesus would soon hear words that would preview what needed to occur before this experience of the glory of the Lord when Jesus informs his disciples that "*the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.*" (17:22). The Gospel of Jesus Christ that these disciples will be called to proclaim is the gospel that speaks both of his death and resurrection. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians, "*we proclaim Christ crucified*" (1 Corinthians 1:23), which would be received as a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, but which would be for those who are called "*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*" (1:24).

- "This power of the coming Kingdom appears to them in the transfigured Jesus, who speaks with the witnesses of the Old Testament about the necessity of his passion as the way to glory. They personally experience the anticipation of

the Parousia, and that is how they are slowly initiated into the full depth of the mystery of Jesus.” – Pope Benedict XVI.

As we are given this “sneak preview” of the glory of our Lord that dwells among us in Jesus Christ and which we will witness on the day of his resurrection, we are also reminded that the fulfillment of that to which we are given a glimpse can only be accomplished if we journey with our Lord through the season of Lent and into Holy Week, where he will accomplish God’s Will through his death and resurrection. Jesus warns his disciples not to tell anyone of what they have witnessed so that there would be no confusion about how Jesus will accomplish this mission, nor will there be any confusion that the way of discipleship is a way that leads them to the cross. As we are given a sneak preview of the one who is our glorious Lord and Saviour, it also reminds us that Christ accomplishes this not through a manifestation of power but as the one who *“did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”* It is a sneak preview of the one who redeemed us *“not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death”* (*Small Catechism*). It is a sneak preview of our blessed assurance that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (*Romans 6:5*).

- “It’s the reason why Jesus called disciples to follow him. Discipleship isn’t just a matter of believing certain things or being pious; it has to do with following the One who beckons us. He wants to take us – as he took Peter and the original disciples – into the very heart of the world’s darkness, where the light we’ve been given, however dimly it may shine in us personally, can make some difference.” – Douglas John Hall.

Sneak previews – in movies, on television, and in books – exist to entice us to experience more of what they give us a glimpse. The sneak preview of the Transfiguration gives us a glimpse into the fullness of Jesus’ identity so that we know that when we answer the call to discipleship it will be one that will lead us through some challenging times but will result in our being in the presence of our Risen Lord and Saviour who promises that *“I will be with you always, to the end of the age”* (28:20). May we follow this well-beloved Son of our Lord and listen to his Word so that we might be the ones who bear his light and love to all people.

Amen.