

God Gets Peter's Attention

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
February 3, 2008*

Matthew 17:1-13

Jesus surprised his disciples many times. But his fate was no surprise. He warned them about it. He was going to Jerusalem, he told them — to suffer, to die, to rise. There would be no turning from this path. And those who would follow Jesus had to be prepared for a similar fate.

On the sixth day, Jesus took Peter and Jacob and Jacob's brother John with him up a high mountain alone. And he was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun. His clothes became white as light. And – ah! – Moses and Elijah appeared to them talking with [Jesus]. At this Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it's a good thing we're here! If you want, I'll pitch three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still talking – ah! – a radiant cloud overshadowed them. And – ah! – a voice spoke from the cloud: “This is my beloved son. I am pleased with him. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. He said, “Get up. Don't be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one, except him, Jesus alone.

On their way back down from the mountain, Jesus gave them this command: “Don't tell anyone what you saw, until the son of man has been raised from the dead.”

The disciples asked him, “Why do the scribes say, ‘First Elijah must come’?” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore everything. This is what I tell you, Elijah already came, but they didn't recognize him. Instead they did whatever they wanted to him. In the same way, the son of man is about to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

Children's Story

One day Ernie was lying on the floor in the family room, watching Sponge Bob Squarepants on TV. His sister AnnMarie came into the room and sat down on the couch, but Ernie didn't notice. After a few minutes, she went away. Ernie didn't notice that either.

Then his mom came into the room and started talking to him. She said, “Ernie, I want you to empty the dishwasher. And you need to take out the trash. And put your hat and gloves away, too.”

Ernie didn't hear a word his mom said. He was busy watching Sponge Bob Squarepants. He didn't even notice she was there.

Then his mom stood in front of the TV and turned off the sound. Now she had Ernie's attention. And she told him about the dishwasher and the trash and his hat and gloves.

This time Ernie heard every word. And he did as he was told.

Most of us are like that. You have to get our attention before we can hear a thing you say.

It's the same even for God. Even God has to get our attention before we can hear.

Sermon

The cloud covered Mt. Sinai for six days before God spoke. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on that mountain (cf. Exodus 24:15-18). The transfiguration of Jesus, on the other hand, was over almost before it began. Matthew tells the story breathlessly. They went up the mountain. They came down the mountain. A few things happened in between: Jesus began to shine; Moses and Elijah showed up; Peter started babbling; then there was a cloud and a voice; and it was over.

Peter, at least, held on to his memory of those minutes on the mountain. In later years, he remembered it well: the mountain, the glory, the voice, the exact words (cf. 2 Peter 1:17-18). On that mountain, God got Peter's attention.

I wonder if God has gotten our attention.

No one's really sure what the transfiguration of Jesus is supposed to mean. Some see its significance in the appearing of Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah. That's the law and the prophets. Put another way, that's the story so far. On the mountain of transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear in order to demonstrate the continuity between the story so far and the story of Jesus. They appear in order to hand over the torch, to pass the baton, to Jesus. Jesus is the anchor, who will run the critical leg of the race.

The transfiguration. Some see its significance in the change in Jesus' appearance. The only-begotten son of God had put on human flesh. That flesh was like a veil. It obscured his radiant glory. And it made it possible for human beings to see God — Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) — and live. But on the mountain, the veil was thinned. It was made suddenly transparent. And the divine glory of Jesus lit up the night. (I imagine it was at night. The Bible doesn't say. But the picture is more dramatic at night.) Divine glory radiated from Jesus' face. It shined right through his clothing. This was an epiphany. Jesus was revealed as bearing in himself the glory of God.

The transfiguration. Some see its significance in the cloud and the voice. A voice came from heaven when Jesus was baptized. That voice identified Jesus as God's royal servant. But no one heard that voice — except Jesus himself and maybe John the Baptist. This time the voice, saying the same thing, is heard by Peter, Jacob*, and John. And, as Peter writes, with these words from that voice, Jesus "received honor and glory" (2 Peter 1:17), because he was God's royal servant, and more.

Finally, some see the significance of the transfiguration of Jesus in his gentleness. Peter babbled at the sight of Moses and Elijah. But with the cloud and the voice, Peter, Jacob, and John came undone. "They fell on their faces, terrified." They didn't dare look up. They could hardly breathe. They were in the presence of Almighty God. But Jesus came to them, touched them gently, and reassured them. He calmed them and led them back to familiar reality.

What does the transfiguration of Jesus mean? Why is it significant? Maybe it's the appearing of Moses and Elijah. Maybe it's the shining appearance of Jesus' face. Maybe it's the cloud and voice. Maybe it's the gentleness of Jesus. Maybe it's all of these things. And maybe it's something more.

I think it's something more. There on the mountain, God got Peter's attention. Moses and Elijah! Jesus' face aglow! A radiant cloud! A heavenly voice! That's the kind of thing that gets somebody's attention. Once Peter's attention and the attention of the others had been secured, God spoke.

First, he identified Jesus. I've already said something about this. And even if the words have multiple and elusive meanings — and they do — this much is clear: there is a special bond between God and Jesus. First, the voice identified Jesus. Then the voice said this: "Listen to him." Those are the critical words: "Listen to him."

What are Peter and the others supposed to listen to? It's clear enough, I think. And it comes in two parts. First, they are to listen to Jesus when he says the messiah will suffer and die. Second, they are to listen to Jesus when he says the path of discipleship will be difficult, disappointing, and deadly.

The transfiguration is part of a series of events that took place near Caesarea Philippi. Here are some highlights of what happened before the transfiguration:

*Usually rendered James (in honor of King James of Bible translation fame), the name is actually Jacob.

- Peter says Jesus is the messiah.
- Jesus says he's going to Jerusalem to suffer and die — and to rise.
- Peter says, "Never!"
- Jesus says, "Get out of my face, Satan!"

Then, after the transfiguration:

- Jesus connects his coming fate to that of John the Baptist.
- Jesus heals a boy his disciples couldn't help because of their lack of faith
- Jesus says, again, that he will be betrayed and killed — and be raised.

The disciples are distressed at this, but it's clear enough that this is something they have to listen to. Because, like it or not, it's coming. It goes with Jesus' gig as messiah.

Also, in the midst of unfolding his own fate, Jesus said this: "To follow me, you have to take up a cross and be ready to lose your life" (cf. Matthew 16:24f.). In other words, the path of the disciple will be no different than the path of the teacher. There will be difficulty. There will be disappointment. There will be death.

None of this is easy to hear. Not if you love Jesus. Not if you love your own life as a gift from God. But God got Peter's attention. And he said, "Listen to my son. Hear what he has to say about the path of the teacher and the path of the disciple."

I wonder if God has gotten our attention. Certainly we aren't deaf to the word about a suffering messiah. We expect his suffering and death. Each year, every Lent, it's the same story, and it doesn't surprise us. Yet isn't there something dreadfully shocking about it? That God should die? That the Holy One should be executed? That the Almighty should become powerless? That the life-Giver should be robbed of life? And that this death should be both at our hands and for our sake? We listen to the word about a suffering messiah. But I'm not sure we hear it. Perhaps we skim over it quickly because we would rather avoid what it suggests our fate could be.

And what about that other word, the warning for disciples? Have we heard that one, really heard it? We sometimes use language about "bearing a cross," though not very often. For us, crosses to bear may be kids who don't listen or a difficult marriage or co-workers who are hostile to our faith. A cross may be having to endure a lower standard of living because we give ten per cent and more to the church and to charities, or because we send our kids to a Christian college.

How strange that we should equate such things with a cross! A cross was an executioner's tool, a means of torture and of death. So a cross is more than mere difficulty or hardship, even if it is for the sake of our faith and discipleship. A cross is death. How close have we come to death for Jesus?

Now maybe a cross won't mean our physical death. Maybe. But doesn't our faith call us to a genuine spiritual death, at least? To a dying away of the old self and then a coming to life of a new self (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33)? To a stripping away of every treasure that competes with Christ? A pruning of every desire that turns us away from Christ? A surrender of safety and security in order to follow Christ? That is our faith. That is our tradition. There is death. And there is resurrection. And death comes first, for the disciple as well as for the teacher. It's Lent before it's Easter.

I wonder if God has gotten our attention.

Maybe he will this Lent.

But would I dare pray for that?