

## **“What in the World Does This Story Mean?”**

**Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18**

I think I can truthfully say I have never been influenced to buy something because of it being endorsed by a person of fame or prominence. In fact, a couple of times I have probably refrained from buying something because of who endorsed it.

Yet, this technique must be effective because advertisers pay huge amounts of money to have certain people endorse their products. I remember reading back a few years ago when Tiger Woods renewed his contract with Buick for \$40 million over five years. That's a lot of money for leaning against a car, smiling, and acting as though you really drive one of those. But the airwaves are flooded with sports and movie stars advocating everything from food to clothes to medicine.

Yet, advertising is relatively new to a game politics has played from its inception. The ultimate of political endorsements occurred in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus. God tells Moses that He will be the leader that frees the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses asks, “But who will I say has sent me to be their leader?” And God replies, “...say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God is Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’” From that moment to this very day politicians have attempted to claim that exact same endorsement.

But though most politicians must settle for lesser lights, they pursue these with equal intensity. This election year has already generated a plethora of endorsements, especially among the Republican contenders. I remember in 2004 when the Democratic candidates converged on South Carolina, each courted Jim Clyburn, an African American politician in a state where four of every ten Democrats is black. Governors, congressmen and women, mayors, movie stars, over the next nine months you will see both the Republican candidate and Barack Obama visit, court, and attempt to persuade these people to endorse them, say they believe they are the person who should be President of the United States.

Now, this is exactly what occurs in our scripture, an endorsement. Jesus takes His inner circle, Peter, James, and John, to the top of a mountain, probably Mount Hermon. He is transfigured, changed, before their very eyes. His face shines like the sun. His clothes become a dazzling white. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear and begin to talk with Him. Peter, wanting to capture the moment says, “Lord, let me erect a tent for each of you.” But as he is speaking a bright cloud overshadows them and a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples fall to the ground overcome by fear. But Jesus comes over, touches them, and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they rise, they see no one else but Jesus. And as they trek back down the mountain, Jesus says, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Now, let's be honest. This story doesn't really resonate with us. Jesus' face and clothes light up. Long dead Moses and Elijah appear. God speaks out of a bright cloud. And then Jesus admonishes the disciples, “Don't tell anyone about this until after I'm gone.” There is nothing in our physical or spiritual experiences that find any similarity with this event.

And that is why through the centuries this passage has received numerous interpretations. Many early Church Fathers viewed it as an allegory, the story's symbols employed to portray differing theological truths. Some modern scholars described it as a post resurrection story misplaced in the text. In the Eastern Church it was celebrated on August 6<sup>th</sup> and by the 8<sup>th</sup> century equaled all other holy days except for Easter. And yet for us today, though this is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Lent, we don't make a big deal of it, seldom preach on it, because it is so foreign to our personal experiences.

Several men are in the locker room of a golf club when a cell phone rings and a man engages the hands-free speaker function and begins to talk. "Hello," the man responds. "Honey, it's me," a woman's voice says. "Are you at the club?" "Yes," he replies. "Well, I'm at the mall and I've found this beautiful leather coat. It's only \$1000. Is it ok if I buy it?"

"Sure," he says, "Go ahead if you like it that much."

"I also stopped by the Mercedes place," she goes on, "and saw the new 2012 models. I found one I really liked."

"How much?"

"\$125,000."

"Ok," he replies, "but for that price I want it with all the options."

"Great!" she says. "Oh, and one more thing, the house we wanted last year is back on the market. They're asking \$950,000."

"Well, then, go ahead and make a deal, but just offer \$900,000."

"Ok," she says, "I'll see you later. I love you!"

"Bye," he replies, "I love you, too."

The man hangs up and the other men in the locker room are looking at him in astonishment. Then he asks: "Anyone know who this cell phone belongs to?"

Some incidents, like the Transfiguration, are so foreign to our experience; we just go along with them.

So, how should we interpret this passage of scripture? What does it mean? Crucial to understanding the story is remembering Matthew's purpose. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, attempting to convince them Jesus was the long awaited Jewish messiah of whom the Jewish scriptures foretold. Understanding that enables us to decipher how the differing elements of this story fit together.

First, they journey to the top of a mountain. Every Jew knew both Moses and Elijah received divine revelations on a mountain.

Then, Jesus' face shines like the sun. Remember that after Moses conversed with God on the mountain, when he came down, his face was shining.

Moses and Elijah appear. These are the two greatest figures in Jewish history. Jews believed Elijah would be the forerunner, or herald, of the Messiah. Some Jewish scholars said Moses would also accompany the Messiah. Moses was also viewed as the lawgiver, the man who brought God's law to people. Elijah was considered the greatest of the prophets, the person through whom God spoke to His people. Their presence confirms Jesus as the continuation of their work and witness. By being there, they endorse Him as the fulfillment of the two sections of the Old Testament — the Law and the Prophets.

A bright cloud appears, what is called the Shekinah, the traditional symbol of God's presence. Remember when the Israelites escaped from Egyptian bondage and wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, there in the desert they erected a Tabernacle, a tent to house God's presence among them. That presence was symbolized by a cloud. The word "overshadowed" is the same term used to describe the cloud over the tabernacle. The Bible says that at the dedication of Solomon's Temple, "the cloud filled the house of the Lord." Again for Matthew's Jewish audience an endorsement that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises.

And then the words from the cloud, God's words, reiterating those spoken at Jesus' baptism, along with the divine command: "listen to him!" All of this symbolism essentially meaningless to us today carried enormous weight and impact for Matthew's audience. Each and every element declared: "This is the Messiah, the Son of God, whom God promised and for whom your ancestors have waited for so long."

At Sunday School one day they were teaching how God created everything, including human beings. Little Johnny seemed especially intent when they told him how the Bible used the imagery of Eve being created out of one of Adam's ribs. Later in the week his mother noticed him lying on the floor as though he was ill. "Johnny," she said, "what's the matter?" Little Johnny responded, "I have a pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."

Sometimes, like in this passage, the Bible's imagery and symbolism is unfamiliar and a little strange to us. Yet, it reminds us that when we understand the Bible's language, the truth of the gospel is as relevant and real today as it was for those almost 2000 years ago.

So, what does all this mean to us? What should we do with this episode? First of all, realize that some things written almost 2000 years ago may not resonate with us today, even if they are in the Bible. That doesn't invalidate their truth, it just accepts that some stories and symbols are time sensitive. Second, though the symbols have lost their intensity, it doesn't mean the truth they convey is lessened by it. Other events of Jesus' life maintain their power to speak to our hearts — suffering unfairly, life after death, temptation, betrayal by someone close to us, love expressed through sacrifice.

Over and over Jesus' words and actions resonate with our hearts and minds. But, the Transfiguration employs symbols understood and loved by Jesus' and Matthew's fellow country men and women. Though we may not emotionally connect with them, understanding them enables us to acknowledge from a different angle what the New Testament reiterates in so many ways: that Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God sent to bring new life to human kind.

But there is an element of the story commentators through the centuries have suggested does speak to us. When Moses and Elijah show up, Peter offers to erect three dwellings or tents. In Middle Eastern culture, Arabs erect tents to show respect to distinguished visitors. So this was a kind, generous and thoughtful gesture on Peter's part. But Jesus doesn't respond to this offer. This is usually interpreted that Peter wished to prolong the "glory" of the moment. He wanted to tarry in the magnificence of this mountaintop experience. Jesus didn't encourage

the idea because He had to go back down the mountain to die. This incident ties the Transfiguration into Matthew's previous story where Jesus told His disciples He must suffer and die. Otherwise, Jesus, nor the disciples, can live within a mountain top experience. Real life takes place at the bottom of the mountain, where events are messy, unpredictable and treacherous.

But notice that Jesus came down the mountain with them. Jesus was reminding Peter that the faith must be lived out in the context of the world, where people suffer and die, where not everyone is a Moses or Elijah, where the Shekinah, the presence of God is hard to see. But the bottom of the mountain is also where Jesus resides. Once in a blue moon, we might find ourselves unexpectedly standing on the Mount of Transfiguration, immersed in the glorious and warming presence of Almighty God. But all the other times we will reside at the foot of the mountain, surrounded by the residue of human existence — disease, death, heartbreak, unfairness, bad bosses, bills, and runny noses. Yet, this story reminds us that even here our God has not forsaken us. Because neither did Jesus stay on top of the mountain. He came down to be with the disciples, with you and me.

The Reverend Curtis Jones relates a profound illustration. One day Jones went to see a friend of his who was now committed to an Alzheimer's unit in a health care facility. When he went in he was confronted with the pacing back and forth of ambulatory patients and their irrepressible chatter. And there amidst all of this confusion sat his ninety-seven year old friend in a geriatric chair, slowly turning and patting the pages of her Bible. Jones said it a powerful symbol and a beautiful picture of faith before God. Even in a diminished capacity, she remained true to and confident in what had sustained her life all those years. Her God was still with her, just as God is with you and me.

“What in the World Does This Story Mean?”

This *is* a strange story, one written more for an audience 2000 years ago than for us. Yet, it reminds us of the eternal and ever relevant nature of our God. Jesus spoke to those 2000 years ago, and He continues to speak to us. The symbolism may vary, but the truth of the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ are as relevant and as powerful as they were that day in Palestine.

The story is strange. But the majesty, confidence, and truth it proclaims still resonate with us today. This morning, with the disciples, as we stand at the bottom of the mountain, are you and I ready to declare by word and deed, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God?”

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