

Reality Check

TEXT: Matthew 17:1-13

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 19, 2023

In our journey across mountains during Lent, this week marks a bridge between the mountains and characters we have visited from the Hebrew Bible to the mountains we will visit with Jesus in the next weeks. Although Transfiguration Sunday was a month ago, we're finally getting to what actually happened on that mountain this week. It's a perfect segue to the experiences of Jesus on mountains; because on this mountain Jesus is visited by both Moses and Elijah, whose mountain stories have filled our first three weeks.

The geographical location of the Mount of Transfiguration is disputed. Tradition since the third century has equated it with Mt. Tabor, which overlooks the Jezreel Valley about six miles east of Nazareth. That's where the Church of the Transfiguration sits today. But the Bible doesn't name the mountain, which tells me that the location doesn't add anything to what the Gospel writers wanted to say. The story is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and none of them thought that naming the mountain was important.

What I think is important in understanding the mystical vision described here is not the geographic context, but the textual context that leads up to it. Remember from last fall that the chapters and verses of the Bible, the subject headings, and even the punctuation and spaces between words were added later to help make the text easier to read. The fact that the Transfiguration story starts chapter 17 rather than concluding chapter 16 says more about Stephen Langton, the man who made the chapter divisions in the 12th century, than the intention of the author of Matthew's gospel.

By Stephen Langton's day, the church had settled on the interpretation of the Transfiguration story: It was a vision confirming Jesus' divinity. But I like to question and probe such things, and I think there may be more to the story. In fact, I think the event might illustrate the "fully human" part of Jesus more than the "fully divine" part. I find that path from the textual context that comes before the story as well as the stories of the men who talk with Jesus on that mountain.

That textual context is virtually identical in the three gospels that tell the story. So, let's go back a chapter to Matthew 16.

Jesus' mood leading up to the vision is frustrated and volatile. The testing by religious leaders has grown more adversarial. He's trying to warn his disciples about corruption in the leadership—"Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!" But even after three years, they still keep taking him literally. "Bread?" they ask. "Why are you talking about bread?" It's all Jesus can do to keep from yelling, "It's a metaphor, you lunkers!"

There's a brief moment of respite when he quizzes them on his true nature and purpose and Peter pipes up to proclaim that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah. Up until that point, Peter's name has been Simon, but with that proclamation Jesus changes his name to Peter, which means "rock" in Greek, and Jesus declares that Peter will be the rock on which he will build his church.

Buoyed by Peter's insight, Jesus tries to prepare them for the freight train of suffering and death that's headed their way, only to have his new "rock" take him aside and scold him for being so depressing. In Peter's mind, that simply can't happen to the Messiah and Jesus shouldn't be scaring people. Jesus' mood turns on a dime at this and he calls Peter an agent of Satan. Within just a few verses, he calls the "rock" on which he was going to build his church a stumbling block.

That exchange is followed by Jesus telling all his disciples that everybody needs to take up crosses and follow him, while warning that everyone trying to save their own hides will lose their lives—and what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose their souls? There are then a couple of verses about the Son of Man coming with angels in glory to close out the chapter.

Jesus' sidebar exchange with Peter—where Peter tells him not even to suggest that horrible things that Jesus just predicted and Jesus responds with “Get thou behind me, Satan!”—is telling. In Matthew, Jesus' ministry begins with Satan in the wilderness, tempting Jesus with a comfortable ride.

We're going to that mountain next week, but the key point here is that Jesus calling Peter “Satan” in chapter 16 is an admission that Peter is tempting Jesus at the end of his ministry, just as Satan had at the start. We can't be tempted by something we don't want; and we can't be tempted by something we have no control over. If Jesus hears Peter's rebuke as a temptation, that means he would very much like what Peter said to be true **and** that he realizes he could still choose a road without crosses in it.

It would not be a temptation otherwise. Jesus doesn't say, “Oh, Peter, if only you could understand that everything is all laid out and can't be changed. I have no choice—you have no choice—it has all been ordained by God and who can thwart God's will?” Nope. Jesus calling Peter Satan, right after such high praise for Peter that Jesus changed his name and made a huge promise to him, is a sign of Jesus' inner turmoil as the end looms on the horizon.

It tells me that Jesus could, in fact, have chosen another path and is extremely upset when one of his closest disciples tries to talk him into doing what Jesus knows is not God's will for him. Jesus has an incredibly hard road ahead. He needs support for this, not a close ally trying to talk him out of it.

Jesus also knows that if even his closest disciples think that the role of the Messiah is to make earthly life easier for everybody, then they're not going to be able to carry the gospel forward once he's gone. If they can't support the cross that **he** has to carry, they will never be able to carry their own crosses and help the world see God's upside-down, first-is-last view of human power and authority.

Matthew 16 leads me to believe that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him in chapter 17 for the same reason he took the same three men with him into the Garden of Gethsemane on the last night of his life—to have disciples he loved and trusted surround and support him as he sought answers and help from God in a time of deep distress.

The vision where Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John was something God allowed them to witness, but it wasn't a vision given for their sake to prove who Jesus was; it was a vision given for Jesus' sake to let him have some conversation with two other prophets of God who were uniquely suited to help buoy him for the days ahead.

The vision has all the signs of God's presence that are familiar to Bible readers and it comes in three stages.

The first is that Jesus starts to glow. His face shines like the sun and his clothes become a dazzling white. Throughout the Bible, in both testaments, that kind of glow is an indicator of someone who is, or has been recently, in God's presence. Angels are described this way, as is Moses after being in the presence of God. Jesus likely wasn't even aware that he was glowing; it's just what happens when you get close enough to God.

In stage two of the vision, Jesus gets company. Moses and Elijah show up and they talk amongst themselves. The disciples don't share what the discussion was about; and I bet that's because that part wasn't for them and they couldn't hear it. It's true that Moses and Elijah are representative of the law and the prophets and were both associated with Messianic prophecy. But they also can relate directly to Jesus in the very human moment he's having. I think this is Jesus exercising his option to phone a friend. Or, in this case, two.

Moses went up Mt. Nebo knowing he was facing the end of his life. God had told him so in Deuteronomy 31. In that same chapter, God had also told him that, in that Promised Land, which Moses would not enter, Israel would prove faithless and begin to worship other gods and that calamity would befall them.

Over time, that's exactly what happened and is what drove Elijah up Mount Horeb, depressed and despondent, thinking that all his work, and all the work of Moses before him, had come to naught. Queen Jezebel was hunting down Elijah to kill him and he thought worship of the true God in Israel would end with his passing.

Now here's Jesus, climbing up a mountain while facing the end of his life. He's not at all sure that even these three nearest and dearest disciples really had a clue what he was about. He could feel the power of the temptation to take an easy out. Wasn't it all going to come to naught anyway?

You can hear echoes of this in Jesus' story in Luke 16 about the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man has died and his soul is in torment. He speaks to Father Abraham and begs Abraham to send someone to tell the rich people still living the big mistake they're making in not helping the poor. Abraham responds, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

That's how the parable ends. The parable Jesus himself told. I have to imagine it's ringing in his ears as he speaks with Moses and Elijah. And I have to imagine that Moses said, "The true worship of God went on after my passing;" and that Elijah said, "There were those who took up my mantle after me and God was with them." But all the disciples knew was that the three men were talking with each other.

Peter, especially, is quite taken with the vision at this stage and suggests they build tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah so that they can all hang out there at the top of the mountain in a bit more comfort. But Peter's musings are interrupted by the third part of the vision, which comes in the form of a bright cloud that overshadows all of them. And out of the cloud comes a voice that says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

The first part of those words are exactly what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism. The "listen to him" is the command at the end of Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 that God would raise up a prophet like him.

But the part of the vision that terrifies Peter, James, and John and knocks them to the ground is not the voice, but the cloud. Throughout Israelite history, the descent of a bright cloud meant one thing and one thing only—the presence of God, in all of God's fullness. And no one could enter the intensity of that presence and live. Not even Moses could enter the Holy of Holies when the cloud descended on the Ark of the Covenant. And here it was—a literal holy terror—within mere feet of them.

When the cloud departs, Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus is there alone. Alive. He survived the cloud. Perhaps he needed the cloud—maybe he needed a bath in God's loving, intense power to firm his resolve for what lay ahead.

It's not wrong to say that this story shows us the special and direct connection between Jesus and God. But I think the event happened because Jesus needed it, not because his disciples did. The disciples will have their own transformational moment at Pentecost, when God empowers them to take up their own crosses, just as God empowers Jesus here to fight temptation and take up His.

And just as God bucked up Elijah to go find a successor and finish the race; and, just as God gave Moses everything he needed to get the Israelites across the desert in one piece before laying him gently to rest, so God will also come to us with whatever we need to finish the work God has given to us. That is the lesson for the rest of us.

Maybe we won't see Moses and Elijah in our hour of need. Maybe we'll see a saint from our own past. Maybe we'll remember the words said at our baptism or the sage advice from a wise friend or teacher. Maybe our strength will come out of nowhere in a cloud; or maybe in fire like Moses on Sinai or maybe in the sound of sheer silence as it did to Elijah on that same mountain.

What all of these stories tell us is that the strength will come when we need it, when the situation seems most dire, in a form that we recognize; but we might have to climb a mountain to get it. Amen.