

Show and Tell

Sterling UMC
March 1, 2009
Matthew 17:1-13

Today we embark on a journey where retrace the footsteps of Jesus as he moves through the final week of his life. This is a Lenten series of sermons and this is the first Sunday in Lent so we are beginning the journey today.

So over the course of these next few weeks we will be walking in Jesus' footsteps trying to understand the answer to several questions. What kind of king is this? What kind of kingdom is he ushering in? And what does he expect of his people?

This morning we are going to look at an event that marks a pivotal point in Jesus' life and ministry. It is a turning point in the Gospels, and from this point forward Jesus begins the march to the triumphant climax of his mission and ministry here on this earth. And this event is known as the Transfiguration. At this miraculous and spectacular event God the Father does a little show and tell for Peter, James and John. And in doing so he answers two very important questions, questions that we must ask and answer for ourselves. Those questions are: Who is Jesus? And what are we supposed to do in response?

You know the story. Jesus takes three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, and goes up to a high mountain where they are at first alone. As they come, perhaps to pray and rest, a sacred moment unfolds around them and Jesus is transfigured before them in a blaze of dazzling light. Jesus' appearance is completely changed. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as lightning. As the disciples try to make sense of it, the moment unfolds even more spectacularly as Moses and Elijah appear as if to endorse the validity of Jesus as their Lord. Then a dense yet illumined cloud overshadows them, and from it a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Finally, it is too much for mere mortals and the disciples collapse on the ground in fear and terror. And then the sacred moment is gone almost as quickly as it came, and they are alone again with Jesus.

A man was arraigned for murder in Los Angeles about 60 years ago. It was a difficult case with a lot of circumstantial evidence.

The man's defense lawyer, however, thought of an ingenious ploy. In his summing up speech, he said:

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, you must find my client not guilty of murder - if there is the slightest doubt in your minds that he is not the murderer.

And now I have one final witness. "The true murderer is about to walk through the door."

All eyes swung towards the door but no one came in.

The lawyer continued: "You see, Ladies and Gentlemen, there is doubt in your minds, otherwise you would not have looked towards the door."

The jury retired to deliberate and came back five hours later with a "Guilty" verdict.

The lawyer was beside himself and before the judge could pass sentence he sprang up and said "But I proved that you had a doubt about my client's guilt. How can you possibly find him guilty?"

An old wizened man in the jury stood up and said: "As everyone looked towards the door, I watched your client. His eyes did not turn towards the door. He did not look towards the door because he knew no one was coming through. Because he himself was the guilty one."

In contrast to that Los Angeles Courtroom, where the star witness did not appear, this powerful story is all about a star witness who did appear.

Who was this star witness? He was none other than God the Father. And He came to answer the question that was on everyone's lips: "Who is Jesus?"

Why was this so important? Well if you look back one chapter to Matthew 16, you will see that this was a very hot topic. The Pharisees were demanding a sign. They wanted Jesus to perform some type of miraculous sign to prove he was who he claimed to be.

Jesus must have understood this since a few verses later once he got his disciples alone he asks them a very pointed question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The question "Who is this Jesus" was burning on everyone's lips.

And in the previous Chapter, we see human responses. Now in Chapter 17 we see a divine response.

I believe the Transfiguration took place, because God the Father wanted to answer the question - definitely - once and for all - Who is Jesus? And in a voice like the sound of thunder from a cloud the voice of the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him."

In many ways, the Transfiguration is the ultimate affirmation. It was affirmation to Jesus himself and affirmation to his disciples as well. You see here on the mountain of Transfiguration, three significant events occurred

First Jesus' appearance was transformed.

Part of the Father's response to the question: "Who is Jesus?" was to reveal Jesus in his full glory. The story records that Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

You may recall a similar incident that occurred in the Old Testament. Moses came down the Mountain having been in the presence of God and his face shone so much - reflecting the glory of God - that he had to wear a veil.

In the same way as the glory of God was reflected in Moses, so God the Father revealed to Peter, James and John - Jesus in his glory.

God the Father gave the disciples clear visual evidence of who Jesus is.

Second, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountain.

Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets (our Old Testament) and I find it significant that after God the Father had spoken, Moses and Elijah disappeared and Jesus alone remained.

What is the significance of this? Another aspect of God the Father's answer is that Jesus is the one who will replace the Old Covenant. A new era is on the horizon. The Old Covenant, represented by Moses and Elijah is going to pass away and the new Covenant is going to come, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This new covenant is a relationship with Jesus.

Finally, God the Father spoke to the disciples.

It is interesting that when God the Father spoke, He simply said "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." Here again we have direct affirmation in the form of the audible voice of God himself that Jesus was who he claimed to be, the Son of God.

That answers the first question: Who is Jesus? Now what the second question; What are we supposed to do in response?

We hear the answer to this question in the words of God himself, "Listen to Him." Jesus is God's Son and we need to listen to him.

It is interesting that God the Father did not say Listen to Jesus and Moses and Elijah. He just simply said to the disciples, "Listen to Jesus."

Along the way to the cross, we will see whether the disciples really do listen to Jesus. If you know anything about scripture, you know that the disciples had a very difficult time listening to Jesus. The human condition of sin gets in the way.

Remember the scripture when Peter tells Jesus, He said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death!"

Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will by no means crow today, before you deny that you know me three times."

And again in the upper room Jesus takes a basin and towel and taking the form of a servant prepares to wash his disciples feet. He comes to Peter and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "You don't know what I am doing now, but you will understand later." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I don't wash you, you have no part with me."

Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "Someone who has bathed only needs to have their feet washed, but is completely clean. You are clean, but not all of you."

And who could forget how well Peter listened to Jesus as he walked on the water? Peter sees Jesus coming to them on the water and he says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the waters."

He said, "Come!" Peter went down from the boat, and walked on the waters to come to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was strong, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got up into the boat, the wind ceased.

God told the disciples on the mountain to Listen to Jesus: and that proved to be very difficult. Remember Thomas who said if he did not see the hands with the holes or the feet he would not believe that Jesus told them he would rise again on the third day. We could go on and on. If the disciples who had Jesus face to face with them had a very difficult time believing what he said, I would venture to say our task is even more difficult.

But we do have the Bible, the written stories of Jesus and his sayings, we do have the experience of the church down through the ages which tells the story over and over again, and we have each other, our own personal experiences of Jesus' actions in our lives to convince us of His love and mercy for us.

God is telling the disciples to listen to Jesus. God is telling us to Listen to Jesus!!

The purpose of God's divine affirmation of Jesus is not to leave him in that exalted state. From the mountaintop, Jesus and the disciples can look out and see Jerusalem in

the distance. It is to that destination that he must now travel as the years of his earthly ministry are ending – and that road will be harsh and unyielding.