

This Is My Son

Matthew 17:1-8

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Something dramatic and even spectacular takes place on what we now know as the Mount of Transfiguration. It is obvious to anyone who reads the passage why we call this the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James and John the brother of James and led them up a high mountain. There you go, there is the mountain. On the mountain “Jesus was transfigured before them.” Transfigured is a word used to describe what those three disciples saw on the mountain. His face, the face of Jesus shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

The light plays a key role in what happens. But the light in itself is not the most important part of what takes place on the Mount of Transfiguration. The light might have been what dazzled most on the mountain. The light might have been what was most dramatic on the mountain. The light might have been what was most spectacular, even stunning on the mountain. But the light had a purpose. As light does, something is illuminated that day. Something is brought to the light. Something is revealed by the light. What is illuminated and brought to the light and revealed is the identity of Jesus.

With the face of Jesus shining like the sun and his clothes gleaming as white as the light, two heroes of the Old Testament appear alongside Jesus. Moses and Elijah are with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. If Moses and Elijah are going to make an appearance, there is no better place for them to appear than on a mountain. Moses met with God on Mount Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments. The description of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai lets us know Moses encountered the glory of the Lord. “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.” (Exodus 34:29) The face of Moses was so radiant he had to start wearing a veil to cover his face or the people would be filled with fear.

Elijah had his own mountaintop experience. Unlike Moses, Elijah was not alone on Mount Carmel. He invited a few of his close...enemies, a few of his close...opponents...a few of the false prophets who had infiltrated the ranks of Israel under the atrocious leadership of King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel. When Elijah went up on Mount Carmel, he did not go alone. He summoned the 450 prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah and...all the people of Israel. He called them all to join him on the mountaintop, on Mount Carmel. What happened on Mount Carmel was stunning and spectacular and dazzling and dramatic, oh so dramatic. Elijah challenged the false prophets to prepare a sacrifice and call on their gods to light the fire and bring the flame. The false prophets all got an F. These prophets were false they brought no fire and they brought no flame. They failed. Then Elijah...then Elijah...then the true prophet of the true God, after drenching his sacrifice with so much water it overflowed and ran down the side of the mountain...only when that sacrifice was saturated and soaked full of water, only then did Elijah called on the Lord. And the fire of the Lord fell, burning up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the soil, and even licking up the water in the trench. The trench was drenched but the fire of the Lord could not be quenched. Dazzling drama as the fire raged out of control.

Are you starting to get the picture of what took place on the Mount of Transfiguration? Jesus was transfigured before those three disciples, his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light. Then, Moses and Elijah appeared. Oh my goodness, this is so awesome, so amazing. But hold on, the best is yet to come. What comes next is not only the best, it is the most important, the most crucial, the most critical, the most vital, and the most unique. What comes next is that a bright cloud covered them all, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Those words, that revelation from the heavenly voice, that revelation from God, our Father in Heaven, is the most critical and crucial thing that takes place on the Mount of Transfiguration. God identifies Jesus as his Beloved Son.

One way we come to understand that the identity of Jesus as God's Beloved Son is the most important thing we take from the Mount of Transfiguration is by what happens after God speaks from heaven and calls Jesus, "My Son, whom I love." After God speaks, the bright lights cease. After God speaks Moses and Elijah are no longer there. The light faded. The heroes of faith disappeared. And all that was left was Jesus. All that was left was Jesus and those words ringing in everyone's ears. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Another way we come to understand that the identity of Jesus as God's Beloved Son is the most important thing we take away from the Mount of Transfiguration is by listening to how one of the eyewitnesses that day describes what he saw, describes what he took away from the glorious day on the mountain. Peter was there that day. Peter was one of the three who went up the mountain with Jesus. Listen to what Peter says about that day on that mountain. "Jesus received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." (II Peter 1:17, 18) Peter was there that day. When Peter writes about that day on what he calls the sacred mountain, he does not talk about the face of Jesus shining like the sun. He does not talk about his clothes becoming as white as the light. He does not talk about Moses. He does not talk about Elijah. No, that is not what Peter talks about. What Peter talks about is the thing that was most important, the thing that was most critical, and the thing that was most crucial. Peter heard the voice of God, the voice from heaven, the voice Peter calls the Majestic Glory, Peter heard the Majestic Glory saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

We are about to enter the Season of Lent, a season lasting from Ash Wednesday until Holy Week. Matthew takes us to an ideal place to begin our journey with Jesus during this Season of Lent. Matthew takes us to the Mount of Transfiguration, where our Father in Heaven, the Majestic Glory, says words about Jesus that make it crystal clear that our only hope, our only Lord, our only Savior, is Jesus. The Season of Lent gives us yet one more chance to walk with Jesus as he, God's Beloved

Son, chooses the path of suffering, the path of sorrow, the path that confronts sin and the powers of evil, the path that leads to death, walking with Jesus in the firm belief that his path is the path that leads to life. In fact, his path, walked by him, is the only path of life, for Jesus is God's Beloved Son. And God is pleased with Jesus. God is pleased with Jesus and with the path Jesus chooses to walk.

How Matthew gets us to the Mount of Transfiguration is masterful in its own right. Since light does play a significant role on the Mount of Transfiguration, what with the face of Jesus shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling as white as the light, I want to use the image of light to trace how Matthew gets us to the Mount of Transfiguration. From the first words of the Gospel it is as if Matthew has been placing lights that create a path to guide us from the coming of Jesus all the way until that path leads us up the Mount of Transfiguration.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with these words, "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." From those first words about Jesus being the son of David and the son of Abraham, Matthew guides us step by step until we stand on that Mount of Transfiguration and hear that not only is Jesus the son of David...not only is Jesus the son of Abraham...Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved Son of God. Imagine those first words being a candle placed on a path. From that beginning point and continuing verse by verse and chapter by chapter Matthew is going to lead us on a path lit by candles until we reach the Mount of Transfiguration. Imagine Luminaria candles stretching from the first words of the gospel forming a path we can follow step by step on our journey to the Mount of Transfiguration.

The Gospel begins with a genealogy, forty-two generations, candle by candle, leading and guiding us to Joseph, the husband of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus.

- When the birth of Jesus was complicated by the fact that Mary was pregnant before she was wed to Joseph, a candle takes us to the moment when Joseph was visited by an angel who assured him all was kosher, for the child she carried was from the Holy Spirit.

- You see candles guiding the travelers who came from the east to Bethlehem, where their search for the king of Jews is fulfilled.
- The candles take us to Egypt as Joseph grabbed his vulnerable son and hurried him to a place of safety while Herod spent his rage on innocent children.
- The candles bring Joseph and family back, but not to Bethlehem. The candles lead us to Nazareth.
- As Jesus grows to be an adult, we follow the candles to the Jordan River where he is baptized, through the desert where the devil does his best to lead Jesus into a dead end, and then Jesus begins his public ministry. With a path of candles behind and a path of candles ahead we hear that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
- Fishermen are called to be disciples, an epic sermon is preached from yet another mountain, and then...life after life after life receives the light of our Lord.
- The leper is made clean, the one who is lame walks, the blind see, the deaf hear, a young girl rises from the dead and a bleeding woman finds a cure, storms are calmed, thousands are fed, and water is walked on.

The trail of candles takes us on a path filled with wonderful and beautiful stops where broken lives are made whole and searching hearts hear words that carry authority and have power. By the 16th chapter of Jesus and his disciples have come to what was known as the region of Caesarea Philippi. With this amazing trail of candles, luminaria lighting the path from his birth until that very day, Jesus asks his disciples a question. Like everything else related to the life of Jesus, the question was of the utmost importance. “Who do you say I am?” Jesus had already asked his disciples who others said he was, but now he wanted to know about them. “Who do you say I am?” Peter, maybe looking back at that incredible show of lights illuminating the blessings and hope Jesus had brought, illuminating the power and the authority of Jesus, Peter finds that a candle has burst into flames within his own heart. Peter realizes something about Jesus. Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” I like the thought that a flame

burst forth in Peter's heart when Peter called Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. That is such a beautiful image. That is an image I hope and pray will be true for each one of us. May that candle of faith burn bright in each of our hearts. May we all be illuminated, filled with the light, that warm and gentle light that comes from knowing Jesus is our Savior, our Messiah, our hope, and our salvation.

It is six days later, six days after that one light has burst forth in the heart of Simon Peter, it is six days later that Jesus takes Peter and James and his brother John up the high mountain we know as the Mount of Transfiguration. As beautiful and touching as it is to think of a candle burning in the heart of Peter, a candle of faith, what happens on the Mount of Transfiguration takes things to a whole different level. Now it is not a constant set of candles lit on a path. Now we have been guided by those candles to the mountain where something amazing is about to happen. Now the light is not the warm glow of candles, the light is a bright blast making the face of Jesus shine like the sun and his clothes become as white as light. The light is blinding. Having been guided by those many candles, now God reveals something about Jesus that is meant not only to dazzle us, it is meant to bring us to our knees and awaken in us hearts that put our complete faith and trust in Jesus Christ. The voice from heaven, the voice of God our Father in heaven, says about Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Peter was there that day. The same Peter that had the candle of faith burst forth into a flame in his heart was there when the dazzling light of the Lord shined the spotlight on Jesus. Is it any wonder that 20 or 30 years later, Peter remembered that day with perfect clarity? "We ourselves heard the Majestic Glory saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him, with Jesus on the sacred mountain." A day like that is not just etched in your mind, it is burned there like an image that will never fade.

The illuminated path I have described for you is so wonderful, from the first verse in Matthew that tells us Jesus is the son of David and the son of Abraham until God the Father speaks from heaven and says, “This is my Son,” it is all so wonderful I almost hate to point this one thing out. Maybe I should just ignore it. Maybe I should just pass over it. Maybe I should let it slide. But it is important, so even though it clouds things up a bit, even though it makes things messy, I feel like we should make note of it. What makes things messy is that Peter does not remember the day as clearly as he claims. What he forgets to mention, what he leaves out, is just the slightest of things. When God spoke about Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration God said, “This is my Son, whom I love.” Peter got that right. Then God said, “With him I am well pleased.” Peter got that. Finally, God said, “Listen to him!” Peter...hmmm...Peter does not include that. Peter forgets to add the part where God says about Jesus, “Listen to him.”

I guess we could just chalk it up to forgetfulness, but something else happens around the time of the Mount of Transfiguration that we cannot ignore, that we cannot pass over, and that we cannot let slide. After Peter makes his confession about Jesus being the Messiah, and before God speaks to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus says some very important things. Unfortunately, Peter does not listen to Jesus. And if it was just Peter who had a hard time listening to what Jesus says between the time of Peter’s confession and the Mount of Transfiguration, maybe we could let it slide. But Peter is not the only one who struggles to listen to what Jesus says between the confession of Peter and the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus tells his disciples that he, that he, Jesus, the Son of God, Beloved by God, must go to Jerusalem...and, suffer many things...and that he must be killed, put to death...and that he will rise on the third day. Peter, instead of listening to Jesus, contradicts Jesus. Peter, instead of listening to Jesus, corrects Jesus. Peter, instead of listening to Jesus, challenges Jesus. Peter hears Jesus say he is headed to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die and Peter says, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” You get the feeling Peter did not want to walk that journey with Jesus. Peter told Jesus never.

I only point that out to you, and to me, because our journey with Jesus does not end on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. Yes, once again, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. We will put the sign of the cross on our foreheads with ashes this Wednesday. We will mark the Season of Lent. We have some palm branches to raise. We have a night before us where we will sit at the table with Jesus while he says, "This is my body given for you and my blood shed for you." We have a prayer meeting with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And then Jesus heads to the cross. Jesus said that is where his life is headed. If the voice from heaven has told us anything, it has told us Jesus is God's Beloved Son, that God is pleased with Jesus, and that we need to listen to Jesus. He said, "I'm headed to Jerusalem." Listen to him. Don't let him go alone. Follow him.

On this last Sunday before we enter the Season of Lent, I pray that we follow Jesus together. This is a time for us to draw near to our Lord and to draw near to one another. I want to leave you with a story that is about a flame. It is not about a luminaria. It is not about a candle. But it is a story about a flame, and about how when we stick together as brothers and sisters in Christ, the flame has a better chance of burning bright.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The Pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday."

As we enter the Season of Lent, I do want to say to each and every one of us, follow him. Follow Jesus. But what I really want to say to each and every one of us is, "Follow him...together, together, as the Body of Christ, as a family of faith, together, let us follow him." Thus ends my fiery sermon.