



LISTEN TO HIM!

MATTHEW 17:1-8

Catching up on the Story

We have reached the middle of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is currently in the region of Galilee, teaching, preaching, and doing miraculous things. After moving from the area around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus explains that he must make his way toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. As we hear from Peter in 16:22, the idea that Jesus must suffer and die does not fit well with the disciples' understanding of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus will have none of Peter's temptations. Truly, Jesus declares, if anyone wants to follow him, he or she must take up their own cross of self-denial.

At the same time, the question of Jesus' identity is never very far away in Matthew's gospel. Characters in the story are constantly seeking to discover just who this Jesus is. Matthew, for his part, is clear about who Jesus is and, to that end, places stories that help answer this question throughout his narrative. The Transfiguration is one of those stories.

Matthew 17:1-8

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. (NRSV)

The Text

As with most texts, the only way to understand the Transfiguration is to understand it in its immediate context and within the context of Matthew's gospel as a whole. Let us start with the immediate context beginning in chapter 16. Jesus asks his followers a simple question. The question is, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The purpose behind Jesus' question is the desire to begin a discussion about who Jesus is, what he has come to do, and how he will do it. Peter answers rightly, proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. For Matthew, this question of Jesus' identity is at the forefront of the gospel. Peter has answered correctly but fails to grasp exactly what that means for Jesus and his followers. Peter displays his flawed understanding of Jesus' identity by rebuking Jesus for saying that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He understands the Messiah to be someone who will defeat God's enemies militarily (i.e., the Romans), not someone who will suffer and die. Truly, though, Jesus declares that anyone who wants to become his follower must practice self-denial as he has and will in his upcoming suffering and death.

At the beginning of chapter 17, we are given a time marker. It is six days since Jesus had the above-discussed conversation with his disciples. Jesus gathers his inner circle of followers, Peter, James, and John, and climbs up to the top of a mountain. There has been lots of discussion amongst scholars as to which mountain this is. The actual mountain on which the Transfiguration took place is inconsequential. What matters is that this event takes place on a mountain. Throughout Israel's history, God reveals himself in special ways on mountaintops. God gave the law on Mount Sinai. The Temple was built on Mount Zion. Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's first readers would have anticipated that something remarkable was about to happen.

Once they reach the mountain's top, something remarkable happens. Jesus' appearance begins to change. Jesus' face begins to shine as bright as the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white. At this point, we should be reminded of another story containing another character whose face glows: Moses. After the Exodus, Moses goes to Mount Sinai to receive the Law. Because of his proximity to God, Moses' face begins to glow and continues to glow even after he has returned to the camp. Whereas Moses' transformation is a result of his encounter with God, Jesus' transfiguration (metemorphothe – to take on a different physical form or appearance—'to change in appearance.' (Louw and Nida, 586), is

suffering and death. God is pleased with Jesus and commands that we listen to and obey him.

The point is this: Jesus is who he claims to be, and so we are called to follow and obey. Only Jesus does not leave us to our own devices to listen and obey. Listening to and obeying the words and commands of Jesus is hard and, at times, terrifying. Loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, responding with love, all of those responses can be so hard. But, Jesus reaches down to us as we are face down, paralyzed by fear of following, and he lifts us up. We can listen and obey Jesus because he is there urging us not to be afraid, cheering us on as we seek to follow the path that he blazed for us.

Here's a list of ways to listen to (and obey) Jesus:

1. Pray for discernment and understanding when reading and studying the bible.
2. Pray for discernment in discovering how you are afraid of following the commands and ways of Jesus. Then, confess those fears to a few trusted friends. Ask them to encourage you and hold you accountable.
3. As a group, identify some practices in the church that help us listen to and obey God. Discuss what it looks like for a church to listen and obey God corporately.

Works Cited

Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2012).

Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996).

death? If so, explain how.

6. Why would God need to proclaim that Jesus is his Son and that he is pleased with him?

7. Peter, James, and John's response to this encounter with Jesus is one of fear. Why were they afraid?

8. Discuss a time when fear kept you from following Jesus or practicing one of his commands. How does this story encourage you to follow Jesus and live out his commands, even amid your fears?

So What?

The question of Jesus' identity is at the forefront of this passage. If Jesus is just some guy, then all he says and does is of no consequence. If Jesus is who Matthew says he is, it has major implications for how we are to live. Throughout Matthew, there are disputes between the religious leaders and Jesus about his identity. Most religious leaders question his authority to interpret the Law. In the Transfiguration, Matthew undeniably depicts Jesus as God's Son. Not only that, but Jesus, as God's Son, is doing everything the Father in heaven has sent him to do, even down to

merely a revealing of who Jesus is on the inside. As Jesus' appearance changes, the disciples get a glimpse of Jesus in his full glory. Jesus' divinity is reinforced here.

I suppose we would have a neat and memorable story if things were to end just with the transfiguration, but the story does not stop there. As Peter, James, and John stand gawking at their friend's changed appearance, two other figures appear suddenly. They are Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's most important leaders. What could be the significance of the arrival of Moses and Elijah? Bruner believes that Moses and Elijah perform two important services. First, they announce the continuity between Israel's history (the Law and the Prophets) and Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, there is tension between the religious authorities, who style Jesus as a lawbreaker, and Jesus, who has been offering the fullest interpretation of the Law by saying things like "You've heard it said...But I say to you...." Moses and Elijah would not be conversing with Jesus in this way if Jesus were opposed to the Law. Second, it provides a discontinuity and a hierarchy between the Old Testament and Jesus. While the Prophets and the Law were trying to achieve the same things as Jesus, enabling God's people to live truly as God's people, Jesus stands above Moses and Elijah and all they represent (Bruner, 108).

As Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are standing there, a bright cloud descends on the mountain. From this cloud, God begins to speak, echoing words we have already heard at Jesus' baptism earlier in Matthew's gospel, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him, I am well pleased; listen to him!" If we were to inspect the original Greek, we would find a definite article (the) before the word, Son. Whenever a definite article appears in this way, it specifies that what follows the "the" is the only thing of that kind. So, God says that Jesus is "the" Son, the only Son. Even though Moses and Elijah are there with Jesus, God is not speaking of them as if to say, "Here are my sons, listen to them!" No, God is singling out Jesus. Moses and Elijah were good, and we should not forget them or throw them out (or the Old Testament), but this is Jesus, the Son of God. The voice then adds a second phrase not uttered at Jesus' baptism: "listen to him!" The word used here is *akouo*, which means to "listen or pay attention to a person, with resulting conformity to what is advised or commanded—'to pay attention to and obey'" (Louw and Nida, 446).

Akouo is also plural in this case and can be translated as, "You all, listen to and obey him!" In other words, God is urging Peter, James, and John

—and us too!— to not only listen to the words and teaching of Jesus but also to obey what he commands.

In the context of the Transfiguration, it becomes clear that the things that Jesus has done, how he has healed and taught, and how he has interpreted the Law for God's people have been pleasing to God. Even Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die, is pleasing to God because of Jesus' steadfast obedience. Jesus is doing and being all God wants him to do and be. Now we are being called to listen and obey, even when what Jesus commands and does is difficult to understand or challenging for us to live out in our own lives. Remember, Jesus has just called his disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him (16:24). In 17:4, Peter's desire to stay on the mountain and build three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah seems to reflect his reluctance to participate in self-denial and suffering. Peter wants to stay on the mountain where he can experience Jesus' glory and power for himself. He does not realize that Jesus' glory and power will be revealed definitively only on the other side of his suffering and death on a cross. Peter wants a Messiah who is glorified and powerful, not one who is suffering and dying.

Peter, James, and John hear God's voice, and they fall to the ground in fear. Then, just as quickly as the experience began, it was over. Jesus, seeing his friends afraid, walks over to them and touches them. The same person who was just a moment ago glowing with the glory of God, the same person who created the universe, now bends down to touch and help these men to their feet. Bruner describes the significance of the touch like this, "Everything is in that little seventh verse, and in some ways this little grab-and-lift at the end of the Transfiguration ... Jesus shines not just to shine, not just to impress, not even in the final analysis just to make us obedient or trembling, but especially to help us up, to put us on our feet, to enable us to breathe again so that we can be obedient to his Word, [so we] can 'Listen to him.'" (Bruner, 179).

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. What other stories from the Old Testament might the Transfiguration remind you of?
2. Read Matthew 16:13-28. How is this passage connected to the passage concerning the Transfiguration?
3. Why do Moses and Elijah make an appearance at the Transfiguration? Can you describe how the Old Testament is in continuity with the New Testament?
4. Look at verse 4. Why do you think Peter wants to stay on the mountain and build three dwelling places for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah? What are the parallels between Peter's response here and our own responses to Jesus?
5. Do we ever prefer to stay on the mountain and experience Jesus in his glory instead of going down the mountain to follow Jesus in his