

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/19/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Transfiguration Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, February 19th

Matthew 17:1-9

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Rise and have no fear

With echoes of our celebration of Jesus' baptism just six weeks ago (3:13-17), God again speaks of Jesus as His beloved Son. In this intimate mountain top experience shared only by Jesus' inner circle of disciples, we see a glimpse of the glory to come. Yet the path to this glory lies not on the mountain top but down in the valleys. During our darkest days we must remember our glimpses of the mountain top, while few, are never far away.

Matthew 17:1-9 Commentary

A pivotal moment in Matthew's Gospel occurs in 16:16 when Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God. From this point on, Jesus begins to tell His disciples how He must die and be resurrected. Jesus teaches His disciples that they too must take up their cross and follow Him. A disciple must die to self-will, take up his cross (embrace God no matter the cost), and follow Christ. Building on Peter's confession, the divine glory of Jesus is revealed during the transfiguration. Particularly important to the original Jewish audience of Matthew's Gospel are the parallels between Jesus and Moses.

¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, 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 white as light.

There are several parallels between Jesus and Moses in the text. Six days (v.1) is an allusion to the six days the cloud covered Mount Sinai when Moses ascended the mount (Exodus 24:16). The high mountain in v.1 is suggestive of Mount Sinai. Also in v.1, Jesus' inner circle of three disciples (Peter, James and John) is a parallel to the three men (Aaron, Nadab and Abihu) who were invited to worship with Moses (Exodus 24:1) and who were later ordained as priests (Exodus 28:1). The transfigured state of Jesus is a clear parallel to Moses' shining face after his encounter with God (34:29). It is important to note that while Moses reflected God's glory, Jesus' physical transformation reflected His own divine glory.

"By themselves" indicates the intimate nature of this experience. This intimate group is together again in Gethsemane, the night before Jesus' crucifixion.

³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

The presence of Moses and Elijah represents the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) and thus symbolize the coming of the messianic age (Malachi 4). This scene thus clearly portrays Jesus as the Messiah - the one who fulfills the Old Testament (see 5:17).

⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."

The last recorded words between Jesus and Peter were a rebuke (16:23) - Peter was a hindrance by setting his mind on the things of man rather than on the things of God. Peter is perhaps more careful here. He addresses Jesus as "Lord" and adds the phrase "if you wish." Peter is thinking of prolonging or memorializing this experience on the mountain top (tents symbolizing the Tabernacle as the place of God's dwelling on earth during the time of the wilderness journey).

⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

With more parallels to Moses, God speaks from a cloud (Exodus 24:16). The words are the same in Greek as during Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17b). This time, the words "listen to him" are added (a parallel to Deuteronomy 18:15).

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

When encountering such a theophany, the disciples take the most appropriate action out of fear. Jesus comes to them in this state and with an intimate gesture exhorts them to rise and have no fear. At this point, only Jesus remains. This is a reminder that only Jesus is our savior – not Moses or Elijah or anyone else.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

Jesus commands his disciples not to tell anyone of this vision until after He is raised from the dead. Once Jesus is revealed as the Messiah, things begin to happen quickly. Now is not the time. Also, His disciples at this point have a misunderstanding of the nature of the Messiah.

Reflections

There is much in this text to indicate the identity of Jesus to the original Jewish audience of this Gospel. The many parallels to Moses and reference to Elijah would have been unmistakable. When it comes to application of this meaning to Christ's disciples today, some clear themes emerge. We are commanded to listen to Christ. Yet Christ is not satisfied with only our hearing - He expects our action. While it is tempting to hang out and bask in the glory of Christ on the mountain top experiences, in this life we are to spend most of our time in the valleys where the work of ministry takes place. We are called to give our lives away and follow Christ down the mountain to wherever this may lead. While this journey involves taking up our own cross, it is in the moments of our abject fear when we are lying face down in the dirt, ready to give in, that Christ touches us on the shoulder and exhorts us to rise and have no fear.

Application

Reflecting on your walk as a disciple, where are your mountain top experiences? Where are your valleys?