

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
Pastor John Guthrie

Exodus 24.12-18, 2 Peter 1.16-21, Matthew 17.1-9
“Listen to Him”



Calvin's imagination knows no bounds. He makes cardboard boxes into time machines and duplicators and transmogrifiers.

Today is that day in the church year designated as Transfiguration Sunday. Jesus is not transmogrified, but he is transfigured on some unidentified mountain in Galilee.

I am sure that many of you are readers, and you probably have a particular type of book you enjoy: mysteries, romance, westerns, spy thrillers, science fiction, and so on. Think for just a second about what makes a good yarn. Very often it is the way a gifted author creates threads that run throughout the length of the story, now and then bringing some of them together, then separating them, then bringing another collection together. Guess what? That technique is not by any means new. The gospel writers, also called evangelists, did the same thing, and Matthew is among the best of them.

Seven weeks ago was another special Sunday in the annual liturgical calendar of the church: Baptism of the Lord. You'll remember that all four of the gospels have a brief section describing Jesus being baptized by his relative, John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke those accounts are very similar, but not totally identical. In Matthew's account in chapter three, immediately after Jesus is baptized the Holy Spirit comes and rests on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased."

The words are nearly the same on the mount of transfiguration. Jesus goes there with Peter, James and John, his inner circle of disciples. There, we are told, he is transfigured: his appearance changes dramatically: his face shines like

the sun and his clothes become brilliantly white. Moses and Elijah suddenly appear on the mountain with him, and the three speak together.

Always impetuous Peter wants to build shelters for the three men, for some reason, but when he proposes this idea to Jesus a cloud suddenly overshadows the six men and a voice speaks: “This is my Son, whom I love, and with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” The disciples fall to the ground in fear, but Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” Moses and Elijah have vanished. On the way down the mountain Jesus tells his disciples to tell no one about what they have seen “until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

At Jesus’ baptism and his transfiguration, his Father speaks from heaven, identifying Jesus indeed as his son, expressing deep affection for him, and explicitly stating that he is pleased with him. In the transfiguration account he follows with, “Listen to him!”

There are other threads in both the Old Testament and New Testament narratives that converge on this mountain in Galilee. For example, who are those who suddenly appear on the mountain with Jesus? They are Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, the ancient set of instructions by which the Jews were compelled to live, and the prophetic tradition which is still preserved in our sacred texts today. So what? So Jesus is understood by Matthew and many others to follow in the line of Moses and the Prophets, representing the fulfillment of the Law, as we have seen, and as a great prophet, one who calls his people to repentance, faithfulness, and justice.

You will remember well that Moses had multiple encounters with the LORD on Mount Sinai. Do you remember that Elijah also had an encounter with the LORD there? It is recorded in 1 Kings chapter 19, when Elijah flees there from the vengeful wrath of Queen Jezebel. On that mountain Moses receives the Torah, the Law or Instructions. On that mountain Elijah is given new instructions, and they do not involve continuing to run from Jezebel. He is told to anoint a new king over Israel and a new prophet to replace him after his service is done.

God says to Abraham, “Take your son Isaac, your only son whom you love, and sacrifice him on a mountain that I will show you.” Do you see the connection, a beloved son who is taken up on a mountain. Not to mention a devastating sacrifice which is to come. Isaac is spared, of course, at the end of that story.

The return of both Moses and Elijah were anticipated by the Jews as signs of the establishment of God’s kingdom, peace, and justice on the earth. Jesus follows clearly and finally in that tradition.

Do you remember that after Moses has gone up onto the mountain to meet with God, his face shines so brightly that the Israelites are afraid of him, the result of a very close encounter with the living God. Jesus' face shines in the same way.

There are connections with Psalm 2 in which the LORD says, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” There are connections with the Servant Songs of Isaiah, especially passages like Isaiah 42:1, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

And then there is the multitude of connections within the gospel of Matthew itself, which involve mountains. When Jesus is tempted by Satan, one of the three temptations happens on a mountain. You will see the temptation story presented in a unique and wonderful way by our youth next Sunday. Don't miss it! Jesus agonizes in the Garden of Gethsemane before he is arrested, on the side of a mountain. He is crucified on a hill.

Another connection: Jesus is glorified after his resurrection. His transfiguration on the mountain looks forward to that time.

Why is it important that all of these threads, and many others as well, are woven together at this particular point in Matthew's narrative? It's because Matthew wants us to see clearly that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Messiah, is the fulfillment of the LORD's plans for Israel and indeed for all of humankind. Jesus is indeed God in flesh, one of us, the one who had been promised to the Jews for generations and for whom they had been looking for centuries. When all of these threads are woven together, these truths burst into the consciousness of those who read Matthew.

Immediately before and after the transfiguration narrative, Jesus gives all of his disciples the shocking news that to follow him is to choose the way of suffering, to choose the way of the cross. His first of three predictions of his suffering and death appears in the preceding chapter, and then his saying to his followers that if they want to follow him they must pick up their crosses. If they will lose their lives for his sake, they will save their lives.

On the way down the mountain he reminds them again that he, the Son of Man, will die and be raised. He continues that theme only a few verses later, and before the end of the chapter he has issued his second passion prediction.

Very shortly Jesus will be forcibly marched to the top of another mountain. Instead of appearing there with brilliant white clothing, he will be stripped naked. Instead of appearing there with their eminences Moses and Elijah, he will be

nailed to a cross between two dirty, naked, common thieves. Instead of an awesome affirmation from heaven, “This is my Son,” he will receive taunts and insults: “IF you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”¹

The transfiguration reminds us of who Jesus is, but it does not remove the suffering he must still undergo for the sake of all humanity. The cross still looms in the future.

Next Wednesday we begin the Season of Lent, looking among other things toward that cross, remembering that suffering, remember the call we have received to take up our own crosses and follow. Remembering that the walk of discipleship is not about comfort or security, but rather serving others in humility and self-giving love, as Christ has done for us.

When we are beaten down by that calling and find ourselves seemingly alone, Jesus comes to us and says, “Get up and do not be afraid.” Get up in the original text is literally, “Be resurrected.” “Get up and do not be afraid.”

The voice from heaven resounds, “This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am very pleased.”

“Listen to him.”

¹Mark A. Throntveit, <http://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=4044>, Exegesis I- Matthew 17:1-9. Many of the scriptural references in the first part of the sermon are drawn from this article.