

Matthew 17:1-13: Title: Glorification

Last Week:

Let's start this morning by remembering last week.

Jesus had told his followers he'd suffer and die; he told them that what was true of him would be true of them.

But this gets turned on its head! He'll rise from the dead. He'll come back. When he does, he'll have all the power of Heaven at hand, and he'll reward each person for what they've done--that is, for whether they've taken up his way of life, or rejected it.

And the passage ended with this:

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Today:

Today's passage picks up where Jesus left off then. And I love today's passage. I love how weird it is. I love how much it reveals about who Jesus is and what he's doing with himself. I love Peter's response to Jesus, because it's so perfectly human, so reasonable given

life, but so unreasonable given all that he should know by now of who Jesus is.

“Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” Jesus says, and then Matthew tells us this:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

Before we begin our discussion of the scene that Matthew is setting up for us, let’s pray together.

Prayer:

On Top of a Mountain...

The way Matthew begins today’s passage is significant. He almost never tells us how many days take place between this thing or that thing Jesus does.

But he does here. It’s a marker to pay attention, and directly links what he just said about “seeing the Son of Man come into his kingdom” to right now. In Matthew’s mind at least--and so, in ours, too--this

scene on this mountain top is what Jesus is referencing when he promises that some of them will see Jesus coming into his own.

...all covered with the Kingdom of Heaven:

Let's review Kingdom language for a second. A Kingdom, of course, is a place where one will determines everything. One will; one person. We think of law as a "body" of things that we should conform to; in a kingdom, the law is not a "body of codes"--it is a "body"--a person--one ruler, making all the rules. We don't live in a kingdom, of course, and we can see the ways that's a grace to us.

But we hear "kingdom" and we think "place"--a kingdom is a place where there is a king. This makes sense. But the word "basilea," which we translate "Kingdom," in Greek doesn't emphasize a place so much as the activity of the one who is king. The activity of the one who is king. The capability and right that one will has to rule over others.

Do we follow? The Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew so often puts it: it's the reigning component, the capability and right of God to express His will, and His purpose, and His goals. That is what is implied by the

word “kingdom.” It’s not a place. It’s definitely not “Heaven” the way we think of Heaven. God’s Kingdom is God’s right to rule. And that right extends throughout all creation.

What Peter and John and James see up on this mountain is a glimpse of God’s power, of His will and His right to determine how He should be obeyed. This is what Jesus thinks his disciples will discover as he drags them up to the top of this mountain.

And something happens.

Woah!

2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

4 Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud

covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Mountaintop: Theophany

A mountaintop. The voice of God and the cloud. Clothes that shine like “lightning flashes.” Jesus’ changed face. And of course, the onlookers’ fear.

All of these things are Old Testament markers of something significant; they are what happens when God shows up. The term is a “theophany,” greek for “God Manifested” or “God Shown.” When God shows up in the Old Testament, this is how people experience it.

If they had thought about it at all, Peter and John and James would have described God showing up in this way. They would have expected this, having been shaped and formed by their Bibles.

They wouldn’t have expected Jesus to initiate this theophany; God initiated these sort of things. They also wouldn’t have expected God to say, of this Jesus-- even if he’s the Messiah, the Hope of all Humanity and all Creation--““This is my Son, whom I love; with him I

am well pleased. Listen to him!”

God usually communicates, basically, “Listen to me!” not “Listen to him.” But here God identifies as especially Jesus’ father: This “Son of Man,” as Jesus calls himself, is granted all the family rights over all the family property--and the family property happens to be everything, include James, John, Peter, and whatever they do with themselves.

And just as before Christmas we were invited, in Matthew, to ask “Who do we say Jesus is?” And last week, invited to ask “How do I live with self-denial, taking up a cross for Jesus’ sake?” we are here invited to ask “Will we listen to Jesus?”

Actually, we aren’t invited here, much are we? We’re told, really: “Listen to him!” What we have to ask, I guess, is if we’re listening to Jesus or not. Are we doing what he tells us to do? Are we considering what he asks us to consider? How is Jesus informing our decisions or our habits? Ultimately, do we pray, planning on hearing from the Lord?

If we aren’t listening to Jesus, then we aren’t doing something basic to the Son of Man’s Kingdom.

Because of course, as far as Jesus is concerned, what they are seeing is God's capability and right to rule and power in action. They are getting a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven, God's right to determine how he should be obeyed, and what they discover is God saying "Listen to Jesus." This is what God wants of us.

***Mountaintop:
Moses, Elijah, Jesus***

And with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. They are really there, somehow, bodily--although with something like superhero bodies--and Jesus is really talking to them.

Moses was, of course, one of the greatest Old Testament characters. He released Israel from their 400 years of ethnic slavery in Egypt, he led them in this exodus to the promised land, and along the way God gave to Israel, through Moses, the special way of living that He expected from His People. The Torah, we call it. The Law.

Elijah was the go-to prophet. He was the standard prophet. Elijah is to prophets what McDonald's is to fast food. He was Israelite's pop-cultural standard, and the greatest of prophets, the ideal prophet. Elijah, if we don't remember, was snatched away bodily by

God, and everyone expected him to show up again and pave the way for the Messiah.

Mountaintop: Elijah, Clarified:

And let me jump to the end of today's passage. Because at the end of today's passage, we read this:

10 The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

They're confused, and reasonably so. If Jesus is who God just said Jesus is, if what's happening is really happening, it seems like God skipped steps in the "Installing the Kingdom of Heaven" manual. Because Elijah, as far as everyone believed, was to show up first, and then the Messiah would come.

And Jesus clarifies this: They're right, they just mistook the figurative for the literal. They didn't realize that what they ought to be expecting wasn't Elijah himself, but someone who acted like Elijah:

11 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize

him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

I'm glad that Matthew gives us the commentary, "Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist," because, you know, I didn't get it. But they did, and it's a nice way to clue me in. Jesus also takes the opportunity to remind them that the way of John the Baptist will be his way, too, and all this glory that they've just witnessed...it's not permanent.

Mountaintop: "Law & Prophets"

Jesus says, of course, that John the Baptist fulfilled this expectation. But whatever happened to Elijah, he and Moses are alike now: shining, bright. More real than real. It's like they're covered in glitter lotion. Remember glitter lotion?

Well, if we don't remember glitter lotion, we might remember the way Jesus asks people what "the Law and the Prophets" say. This is a common way for him and his peers to talk about what we call the Old

Testament. Moses and Elijah are representatives of the Old Testament. They are the Law and the Prophets, bodily, representatives of all God's work in history in this moment.

The Old Testament and the New are in conversation here. This is amazing. This is powerful. This is crazy and exciting.

And while Luke gives us insight into what they talked about, Matthew doesn't; it's enough that they are here, together; that's sign enough, insight enough, and validation that what God just told Peter, James, and John is something worth listening to...

Mountaintop: Recognizable

Remember: Jesus expected Peter, John, and James to realize that they were seeing some of the truth of the Kingdom of Heaven; that what was happening here should be recognizable to them. And if it's not to us, for one reason or another, that's okay. But we can take comfort in the fact that this probably met their expectations: they were scared to death, right? God's voice. This was all really insightful.

And I take comfort in the fact that Peter, at least,

recognized Moses & Elijah. And that's nice, because he shouldn't have been able to, right? He didn't grow up with either of them. All he's grown up with, at best, are pictures--pictures drawn here or there, decorating this or that, or the pictures in his head.

This is comforting to me. If Jesus were to return this afternoon, I think we'd recognize him, too. And of course, when God shows up in our midst, don't we recognize Him? When God does something, when we perceive that we're somehow near the Kingdom of God, near the flexing of God's power, we can recognize it. We're called to give voice to it. One of the reasons we always include a moment of sharing prayers and praises and thanks is because we're called to rejoice with each other when we recognize God's work in or around our lives.

What we're not called to do is act like Peter.

Mountaintop: Eager Peter

Because what Peter does is...well, it's understandable, isn't it? There are two ways to read what Peter does here.

The first is that he's doing what any of us would do,

what we all have done in similar situations: he tries to hang onto the good thing that's going on. He clings to the idea of it: ***“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”***

This is perfect. This is so human of Peter. And we all do this. If something seems good, we want to hang onto it for as long as we can.

We want to make something good permanent. But to make a good things permanent is often--not always, but often--to take away some of the goodness we were trying to protect in the first place. In this case, of course, if Jesus settles down here, whatever else it would mean it would definitely mean no crucifixion, no resurrection, no hope for humanity. The devil would win, and sin and death with him.

We're so influenced by the way this scene shows up in other Gospels that we can't help but read what Peter says here as, oh, thoughtless at best. We read Peter as unclear about what's going on, and when God's voice rings out, and the cloud covers everything from sight, it's to us as if God himself is cutting Peter off for being so clueless...and yet, so reasonable. Because, of

course Peter would misunderstand what's going on, would want to try to set up camp, here, and cling to this good thing.

We have the Holy Spirit. We have Scripture. We have one another. We are without excuse when it comes to discerning well. Peter was spitballing.

And we may think of times when we've held on too long to something good, and in the process, taken away some of what was good about it. We've clung to relationships when we should have let them go. We've clung to ideas--about God, about ourselves--when we should have let them go. We've turned pleasures into addictions, or habits, or simply things that claim far more of our resources than they should.

We've held onto things so long that when we finally try to let go of them, realizing they aren't good anymore, we find that they won't let go of us.

Childhood is a joy, or could be--should be--but telling someone to "grow up" is one of the first ways we learn to dismiss people. And it's so powerful because it is ultimately true.

Are there things in our lives that are good--or were good--but that we need to give up? Have we tried to make permanent something that is only, and should only be, temporary? Time passes, you know; the present passes away. God will make good of our choices to trust him as it does. But we must be people who receive "right now's good" as a gift. Peter's request was ultimately a selfish, short-sighted one. We're called to taking a long-view of our lives and living selflessly. Those are impossible things to do if we're trying to hold too tightly to what seems good right now. There are many poisons that taste sweet when we first take them in.

Together:

I have become convinced basically in the past few years as your pastor that if we pay close attention to Jesus, he'll let us know when it's time to let go of good things so that better things can come along.

I mean, the Christian life isn't a life like Peter wants here. It's not that it's bad to settle down physically; it's always the case that the deeper our roots to a place are, the more it becomes our place, and following this, the more we generally care for it, want its good. Permanence and not quickly leaving a place or a

situation is a virtue, I think.

But again, the Christian life is not one in which we can build for ourselves huts to populate with whatever we think is good in the moment. If Jesus stayed put, his journey to Jerusalem would have stalled out, and our journey from the fear of death and slavery to sin wouldn't ever have started. No Holy Spirit. No Church. No freedom. No hope.

Smoky Row must be a place where we can accept the good of the present moment without trying to loop it forever. Churches often become living museums, historical re-enactments, with every good thing from every good year being redone again and again and again, long after what was initially good about it is barely a memory.

There may come a day when the Community Garden, or the Food Pantry, some of our core values or, gosh, the way we arrange chairs--it can be anything, right?--needs to be relinquished by us because it is clear to us all that this is what God is asking of us. It is not easy for us to be open to losing what's good; but nothing Peter or John or James could have done would have compelled Moses and Elijah to settle down and set up

an autograph table.

I think we are good at letting go, frankly, as a congregation. We're okay at receiving today's good for today, and being blessed by it while we pass it on as a blessing. But we've got to protect this virtue, because it is a rare thing among the privileged citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. We will always be tempted to make permanent something that's fruitful, but as Jesus says elsewhere, if something is fruitless, and the only good it has was yesterday's good, then it needs pruned. Peter's response to this reminds as a congregation to receive the good God does with us as a gift, not a right; for today, not forever.

There's another way of reading what Peter was doing here. It's less critical, maybe. We can read Peter as simply giving voice to happiness. He thinks the timing is great; they're there! And all he wants to be is helpful, set up some tents, make people feel at home so they can help! Honestly, even if this is all he's trying to do, he's still trying to cling to something that can't be clung to. And it also still implies some sort of blindness to the truth of what he was seeing.

Things end, as they do. God's voice interrupts Peter,

the cloud falls upon them, and they freak out, falling prostrate on the ground, because that's what you do in a Theophany. Humility flips on, you know?

But:

Ending:

...Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Secrets, resurrection; we'll see more of this in the coming weeks.

Conclusions: Listening

I want to leave us with this:

Are we trying to cling to some good that we should not cling to? Have we taken some good thing, and in our efforts to make it last forever, turned into something

bad? The world is full of sweetness, of good people, places, things. But following Jesus means letting him lead us forward, and receiving the present as a gift. We can't cling to this moment, because if we do we will trade away whatever goodness the future might bring, and the good of today will stale.

Are we listening to Jesus? God the Father has rights over His creation, and He has handed those rights to rule over to His Son, whose will for us our good.

If we're not listening to Jesus, whatever it is we're doing, it's somehow less than. We're living up to something less than the best version of ourselves.

My only tip in this aside from a reminder to pray, pray, pray, whatever that means to you, my only tip in listening to Jesus, in letting the good of the present be what it is, and nothing more is to do whatever we can to nurture intimacy with one another. Peter, John, and James didn't tell anyone about what they saw on the mountain until much later--they listened to Jesus at least in this--but they probably did, in quiet late moments, remind one another of it. If we can become friends of one another, advocates, we can overcome any trouble. Let's listen to Jesus. Let's let not trade

tomorrow's "better" for right now's "good," which won't last. Let's help one another in faithfulness.

Conclusions: Fear

And let's not be afraid.

The first thing Jesus says to his three closest friends, the ones who most deeply trust him, after hearing God say "Listen to him!" is "Don't be afraid."

They needed to hear this. It comes after two important declarations from Jesus that his way is a suffering way, and his troubles are troubles that, by implication, they'll experience, too.

We always need to know what Jesus knew, that God loves us, that God is well-pleased with us, that we are God's Children, and even, that we ought to be listened to--at least, we ought to be listened to when we ourselves are most obedient, most sensitive to the Spirit, most fully in prayer and attentive to God.

And when we see the Kingdom of Heaven being played out, and God doing things around us, we ought to discover in ourselves something that is a little bit like fear, or could be mistaken for it. We aren't meant to be

afraid, but we are meant to be awestruck, we are meant to realize that we--us, so weak, so small, so mortal and prone to self-destruction at least--when we see that God is working through us, and we discover God working in spite of us, it should drop us to our knees--at least figuratively, and at least in awe.

And it may be that one or two of us have experienced such closeness with God that we've recognized, in that moment, the truth of our own sinfulness, and something much more like fear than awe catches us. We need to cling to the "Don't be afraid," too, knowing we are God's beloved children, in whom He takes great pleasure.

In today's passage, for a moment, the Old and the New were brought together; God revealed the absolute rights of this Messiah, and His deep, deep love for him. We ourselves are loved at that same depth. And we who listen to Jesus, who receive the good of the present moment as a gift rather than a right to be captured, and who live without fear, we're off to a good start in bearing witness to the Kingdom of Heaven, a secret we aren't meant to keep anymore, but reveal with all ourselves.