

“Jerusalem Awaits”
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Transfiguration of the Lord
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Old Testament Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day, he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

¹Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then 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.” ⁵While 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!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”



Sermon: *“Jerusalem Awaits”*

This story of Jesus’ transfiguration on a mountaintop is one of those weird, church stories that people either don’t understand or don’t pay much attention too. Jesus becomes shiny, God’s voice booms out, people get scared, dead prophets start showing up, nobody understands what’s going on. It might actually make for a good Wes Anderson film. Taken out of its context, it doesn’t make a lot of sense. In a world of trouble and challenges, in a world that yearns for hope, what does it matter that a couple of the disciples reported seeing Jesus’ face glow like the sun and his clothes turn dazzling white like a laundry soap commercial? To see why this story matters, you have look at what just happened and at what happens next.

In the scene just before this one, Jesus asks the gathered disciples “Who do people say that [I am]?” To which the disciples answer “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asks the question directly to them: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Simon Peter, impetuous as always and with just enough understanding to be dangerous answered, “You are the

Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus praises him for his insight and famously calls him “the rock” on which “I will build my Church.”¹

When Peter calls Jesus the Messiah, he uses the right word, but in the wrong way. Peter is speaking in classical terms. The Messiah was expected to be one who would restore Israel to its former glory. The Messiah would be a temporal ruler who would literally ascend the throne of David, throw off the shackles of the Roman Empire, and lead Israel back into prominence as a world political power, greater than it had been under David and Solomon. And it had been pretty great under David and Solomon.

Israel had been strong, militarily, politically, and economically. The Old Testament books of 2nd Samuel and 1st Kings in particular, tell of the rise of Israel as a power in the ancient Mediterranean world. But mistakes were made. The people and their Kings forgot God’s law. They fudged. They cheated. And God allowed them experience the consequences of their actions. They declined as a nation. They were conquered, and repeatedly subjugated by foreign powers.

But through the prophets, God had promised a Messiah: one who would come in God’s name and make things right; a deliverer; someone to redeem Israel and reunite her with God; to make right the relationship that had been broken by human sin. For many of the prophets and the people of Israel, this meant a literal King. who would reign in power, throw off the yoke of foreign oppression and restore Israel as a political entity, forever. So, when Peter calls Jesus the “Messiah,” that is probably what he had in mind.

But Jesus meant something else and after asking the disciples “Who do you say that I Am,” Jesus begins to tell them and show them who he is and who he will be.

In the paragraph immediately following Peter’s declaration, Matthew tells us that “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”² That’s not what Peter believes it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and he says so loudly, rebuking Jesus with the words “God forbid it! This must never happen to you!”³

But Jesus replies with one of the truly jarring statements in all of scripture saying to Peter “Get behind me *Satan*, you are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”⁴ The one Jesus called the “rock of the foundation” he now calls “a stumbling block;” a transition that occurs in the space of just five verses.

But Jesus then makes it real for the disciples too, saying “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”⁵ Jesus has now redefined not only what it means for him to be Messiah, but also what it means for *them* to be followers of that Messiah. And the defining nature of *both* is not privilege, but sacrifice.

¹ Matthew 16:13-20, NRSV

² Matthew 16:21, NRSV

³ Matthew 16:22, NRSV

⁴ Matthew 16:23, NRSV

⁵ Matthew 16:24-25, NRSV

I wonder what questions were charging through Peter's mind at *that* moment. What doubts were beginning to creep in? Could he have been wrong about this Jesus? Was this all just a fool's errand? The Messiah couldn't really be persecuted and killed... could he? And am I expected to follow suit?

Jesus' proclamation about what it means to be Messiah is just the beginning, for we are setting out on that slow and steady march towards Jerusalem, toward that important crossroad in our story where Jesus will not only teach and preach of the Kingdom of God, but lay down his life for it, too.

Jerusalem will be tough. The Scribes and Pharisees, the temple authorities, the Roman civil authorities, all will provide a hostile environment for Jesus and his disciples. What Jesus has just said gives Peter and the others reason to worry; reason to be afraid. Jesus spoke of suffering and death; both his own and potentially that of the disciples, too.

We hear this story from our 21st century perspective. We know how it ends. Like any movie about an historical event, *Titanic*, *Apollo 13*, *Jackie*, we know how this turns out from the beginning. Knowing the end relieves some of the tension. So, it's easy to forget that the disciples didn't. They hadn't experienced Easter yet. The resurrection was not a historical fact for them. They were facing the fearful prospects of hostile Jerusalem and Jesus' words that death was a part of the deal.

Today, in the modern church, we hear those words about laying your life down to save it and we believe that those words are figurative. Raise your hand if you think being a Christian means you will literally have to die for what you believe. But when Jesus tells them he's going to suffer and die, they would have been shocked by those words. Messiahs don't suffer and die. And their followers certainly aren't expected to die, too. Taken literally, these words must surely have shaken the disciples.

But then, one day Jesus says, "Hey guys... come with me. I want to show you something."

Standing atop that mountain, with Jesus and James and John, Peter receives all the reassurance he could ever need. Jesus' identity is confirmed. The disciples see Jesus wrapped in light, communing with the greatest figures of Israel's prophetic history, and they hear the voice of God thundering forth, calling Jesus "Son." And Matthew tells us that they collapsed to the ground in fear.

After all that, who wouldn't?!? Remember, it was believed that to see God or to hear God's voice was to be struck dead. Of course, they were afraid. But then Jesus does something else: he reaches out and touches them, reassuring them, softly speaking to them: "come on, get up, don't be afraid. Let's go home."

And now, because of what they've seen and heard and felt, no matter what awaits them in Jerusalem, Peter and the other two disciples know that God is more powerful than that. No matter what awaits them in Jerusalem, they know that Jesus is God's anointed. They do not know yet what will happen in Jerusalem, but they know that Jesus is the Messiah for whom they have been waiting.

Author William Barclay writes that this transfiguration event would have "enabled [the disciples] to see the glory through the shame; the triumph through the humiliation; the crown beyond the cross."⁶ Like being given a small taste of dessert before having to eat your vegetables, this glimpse of Jesus' true identity would have encouraged and emboldened the disciples for what lay ahead.

⁶ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1975. 162. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

What the disciples see on the mountaintop is meant to remind them of who Jesus really is, no matter what they see in the coming days and weeks that might suggest something different. And it serves to remind us, too. Because the events of the transfiguration at the beginning of this journey to Jerusalem, differ radically from what takes place at this journey's end.

Here, Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah, two great figures from Israel's past. At his crucifixion Jesus will be flanked by two criminals. Here, at the transfiguration Jesus is declared to be God's Son." But on the cross, those words will be used by the religious authorities to mock him. At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah depart leaving Jesus alone to be glorified. At the crucifixion, Jesus will die a shameful criminal's death while those gathered around will wait to see if "Elijah will come to save him." Here, at the journey's beginning, Jesus is accompanied by three disciples: Peter, James and John. But by this journey's end, those disciples will have scattered and fled.

Peter seems to understand what lies in wait for them in Jerusalem. Rather than getting on their way, Peter suggests building three booths for Jesus and Elijah and Moses; an act that would allow them to stay for a while; to bask in the glory of God and to rest in the comfort and satisfaction of this moment in God's presence. But alas, Jerusalem awaits.

Standing on the threshold of Lent as we are, it becomes important for us to be reminded of who Jesus is and why we observe this season and celebrate the resurrection at its conclusion. The season of Lent is traditionally a time of preparation for Easter, but before the celebration of Easter morning, comes the darkness and tragedy of Good Friday. Though we would like to rush to the shining sunlight and gentle birdsong of the morning of resurrection, we must first wade through the painful remembrances of Jesus' betrayal, and persecution and crucifixion.

But in the transfiguration we are given a taste; a brief glimpse of what lies on the other side that will give us strength to make it through the long journey. This weird little story that is difficult to understand and easy to overlook is an assurance of who and what Jesus really is.

Jerusalem awaits. But beyond that, lies the Kingdom of God.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.