

Matthew 17: 1-9 In Good Company

I watched Rev. David Whiteley's passionate sermon on Love last Sunday with my mother in Japan. Pastor David reminded us of the three very important words "I Love You," and called us to say them to God, say them to the people in your life, and say them to the people of this valley.

To Love God and our neighbors is Jesus's summary of the Law and the Prophet. Love is the essence of Jesus's ministry. Love, God's Love, is the lens through which the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ is to be understood, even when the passage is as mystifying as today's from Matthew's Gospel.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. On this Sunday before we begin our Lenten journey of 40 days and 40 nights on Ash Wednesday, we are given this vivid and awe-inspiring picture on the mountaintop, where the disciples witness Jesus's face shine like the sun and his clothes turn dazzling white, and the key figures from Israel's history with God, Moses, and Elijah, show up and start having conversation with him. What are we to make of it? What did Peter make of it?

I was immediately struck by the company that showed up for Jesus and grew very curious as to what they could be talking about. Jesus lived among his people and must have had conversations with people on a daily basis, but in the Bible, most of the time when Jesus is talking, he's either teaching or healing people; rarely do we see Jesus "just talking with" folks. Here, it is as if the three of them are conferring with one another. What could they have in common to talk about? Now I am going to read the other Hebrew Scripture passage for today: Exodus 24: 12-18

The 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." So, Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To 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.” Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The 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. Now 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. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Moses was God’s chosen one to deliver the people out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt and he led his people through the wilderness for forty years, and it was then God called Moses to the mountain and gave him the Commandment, the Law for the instruction of God’s people, the instruction the people failed to keep time and again.

In fact, Moses had to go up to God’s Mountain the second time, stay another 40 days and 40 nights, because he had smashed the first set of the tablets with God’s laws when he came down and saw how the people had gone out of control, making an idol of a golden calf. It was when he returned from God the second time, with the tablets of God’s covenant, Moses’s face was shining brightly and people became afraid, so he wore a veil over his face, which he would remove whenever he was in God’s presence.

Now how about Elijah? He was God’s Prophet to the people of Israel who were rebellious and even sought his life, so he had to flee for his life. Here is an excerpt from the Hebrew Scripture, the 1st Kings, Chapter 19, describing how Elijah had fled and was met by God.

Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life. He longed for his own death: “It’s more than enough, Lord! Take my life because I’m no better than my ancestors.” 5 *He lay down and slept under the solitary broom bush. Then suddenly*

a messenger tapped him and said to him, “Get up! Eat something!” 6 Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep. The Lord’s messenger returned a second time and tapped him. “Get up!” the messenger said. “Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you. Elijah got up, ate, and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God’s Mountain. There he went into a cave and spent the night. The Lord’s word came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?” Elijah replied, “I’ve been very passionate for the Lord God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I’m the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!”

Prophet Elijah’s mission was to bring back Israel to see God alone as their God and obey God’s law, and he served God until he passed on his mantle to his successor Elisha and was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Both Moses and Elijah were met by God on the Mountain after facing opposition from the rebellious people. Both endured the challenges for 40 days and 40 nights remaining faithful to God. They are the twin pillars of the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses of the Law, and Elijah the Prophet: The Law and the Prophet, of which Love is the fulfillment. With Moses and Elijah, Jesus, who came to fulfill the law, is in good company. They share the same calling, to bring people back to God. Moses and Elijah may be saying “been there, done that,” but God is doing a new thing with Jesus.

Beholding this trinity, what did the disciples make of this scene? I was first puzzled by Peter’s offer to build dwellings for them. It sounded like a pretty random thing to say. But, in the story of Moses’s mountaintop experience, God gave Moses the command to build a dwelling, the tabernacle, where God

would be present and could be worshipped. Perhaps remembering that story, Peter offered to build the dwellings for them, if the Lord so wished.

But the Lord did not so wish. A voice from the cloud interrupted Peter, saying “This is my Son, the Beloved: with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” God doesn’t need nor want more dwelling places built; rather, what God wants is for the people finally to listen to Jesus, God’s Beloved, God’s Love that became flesh.

To listen to Jesus is to obey him, and to obey Jesus is to Love God and neighbor, fulfilling the Law and the Prophet. That’s what God wants from the disciples, and that’s what God wants from us, the church.

So, looking back on the history of Israel, we have a better sense of what is going on in this picture of Transfiguration of Jesus. But Matthew is not interested merely in the past. The Gospel message is the Good News of Jesus Christ for the living of our days, now and into God’s future. In painting this picture of transfiguration, Matthew borrows an image from what was yet to happen, Jesus’s resurrection. Here is Matthew’s account of the empty tomb: *After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.*

When Jesus’s shining face and his clothes become luminous; it revealed to the disciples what was already and always true about Jesus, that he belongs to the heavenly realm. What the disciples saw was a glimpse of the heavenly realm, with Moses and Elijah alive and well and keeping Jesus company, even now. It is as if Matthew pulled back the curtains of time to show that Jesus is continuous with all that God has promised and given in the Law and the Prophets.

When Jesus took the disciples up to the mountain with him, it was as though the veil was lifted, so that they could see what is normally hidden, the action of God throughout the ages and the ultimate triumph of the hidden ways of heaven.

Why did Jesus grant such a vision to the disciples? Why did Matthew tell this story to his church, and by extension to the churches of all times, even to us?

The disciples had yet to make the journey toward Jerusalem with Jesus where his suffering and death of the cross awaited. For, like Moses and Elijah, Jesus too, was sent to the world that did not know him and did not accept him.

we, too, are about to embark upon the forty days and forty nights of our own Lenten journey preparing ourselves spiritually for the resurrection of Easter. For the disciples and for us, this Transfiguration vision is a promise that we, too, shall live through this earthly journey following God's will. Our encounter with Jesus leaves the church a transfigured community—present in the old age but shining with the light of the new. That's the Love Pastor David was talking about.

Jesus says to the disciples, and he says to us the church, do not be afraid. As we do our best to love God and our neighbor, discerning is the loving thing to do, we are in good company. Jesus and all of God's prophets and saints of God has used, are there, just a thin veil away. Let us pay attention, for the vision God would have us see as we begin our Lenten journey. Amen.