

“Shine, Jesus, Shine”

Matthew 17:1-13

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The Place Where God Meets Us.

The passage we read from the Bible this morning shows us something powerful about Jesus, and it shows us something powerful about our own hope. Jesus goes up a mountain to show his glory, and before long he's going to go up a hill to save us from death.

Mountaintops are often where something spiritual happens in the Bible. People in the olden days thought those were places the gods lived or were likely to intersect with people. That's why they built shrines on high places. God used a mountaintop as a meeting place for his people when he met with Moses on Mount Sinai. It was an awesome place where the people saw the power of God. The book of Exodus describes as a place of thunder and lightning, covered with a cloud, where you could hear a trumpet blast signaling the presence of God. It says,

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. (Exodus 19:18)

Later, God met his people in the sanctuary on Mount Zion. Jesus even gave his Sermon on the Mount to show God was there as the Living Word. The Lord is the God who comes to his people.

The Mount of Transfiguration.

The mountain where today's passage takes place is probably Mount Hermon in what is today southwest Syria. Matthew writes that Jesus went up the mountain and took his inner circle of Peter, James and John. According to Luke, he went to spend time in prayer. All of a sudden, while he was praying, he was transformed: his face became like lightening, his clothes became dazzling white, and Jesus started to shine.

How would you react? Peter wanted to make three shelters, or booths. He was thinking of the Feast of the Booths, one of the three great festivals of Israel. It was celebrated every year, and it commemorated the time of wandering in the desert when God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. The Feast of the Booths celebrated the God who keeps all his promises.

Jesus is going to go up another mountain—to Calvary.

That's when God's voice spoke from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with him. Listen to him!” Jesus knows what he's talking about. He's the one who fulfills all of God's promises to us. He is the Father's Son, and he has to be obeyed.

It's not just that Jesus' disciples are supposed to listen to Jesus in general. Not just that we're supposed to do the Golden Rule or something like that. Followers of Jesus are supposed to listen to the kind of Savior he is. Supposed to listen to what his mission is. Supposed to understand why he came to earth.

A couple weeks ago, we looked at Peter's confession of Christ. That's when Peter told Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Yes, that's who he is! But Peter didn't understand the nature of who Jesus is. Yes, Jesus is God in the flesh. But then he had to explain to Peter that he would have to suffer and give up his life. He is the Lord. But he's also the suffering Servant who did not come to be served but to serve, and to lay down his life for the ransom of many.

Those two themes—Lord and Servant—come together on the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah, the great lawgiver of Israel and the greatest prophet of Israel, appeared out of heaven. They reflect the royal majesty of Jesus, and they were talking with him.

How would you like to have heard that conversation? Luke's Gospel tells us that they talked with him about his "departure," and the word literally is "exodus," like Israel's exodus out of slavery in Egypt.¹ They talked about that departure, and "the things [Jesus] had to accomplish in Jerusalem." That means they talked about the fact that Jesus would have to die on the cross. That was how God was going to save the world—by laying down his life.

Jesus was going to suffer and die in Jerusalem on a hill outside of town, basically a trash heap, called Golgotha in Greek, or Calvary in Latin, which meant, "the Place of the Skull."

See, Jesus would fulfill the Law of Moses and the prophecies of Elijah and all the other prophets, and he would show the truth and grace of God in all its glory. And the way to that glory was over the Mount of Calvary.

Jesus is the Glorious, Suffering Servant.

Jesus was the Lord of Glory, and he was also the suffering Servant. His disciples could only understand this from the perspective of time. Like John says in his Gospel,

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. (John 12:16)

John says in his Gospel,

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Maybe John was even thinking about the Transfiguration when he wrote those lines "we have seen his glory." After all, the three disciples saw the glory of Jesus on the

¹ See Luke 9:31

mountain that day, and after Jesus' death and resurrection, they understand what their experience on the mountain meant. The Transfiguration showed one kind of glory, and Calvary showed another kind, the kind that shines through the disguise of suffering and shame.

So years later, Peter remembered and he wrote to the church,

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.
(Peter 1:16-18)

Peter had perspective when he looked back and remembered; when he thought about how Jesus explained the meaning of his death before it ever happened.

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. (Hebrews 12:18-22)

Jesus was going to the cross like he said he would. Three days later, he rose from the dead just like he promised. So we know he'll keep his word in everything he promised. We know death is not the end—we have a great future.

You can have that hope. Maybe you've never put your trust in Jesus, and he's asking you today, "Will you trust me?" If you do, you will spend eternity with Jesus on the other side of the grave, and whatever you face, even death itself, you're not on your own any more.

In the movie "The Lord of the Rings," the Elf-Queen Galadriel gives gifts to the company of the ring. She gave Frodo, the Ring-Bearer, a very special kind of gift. It was a small crystal phial containing light she had caught from Earendil's star, the light that had first lit the world. She said, "May it be a light to you in dark places, where all other lights go out." When the world's a dark and dangerous place, the light of Jesus will show you the way.

See, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for the great mission he had ahead of him. He would go on trial before the leaders of his people. They would try him and condemn him. They would beat him and mock him and spit in his face. They would nail him to a cross to die and lay him in a tomb. But death couldn't hold him, and on the third day he was going to rise again from the dead.

Jesus is God with us.

Here's where I think the story leaves us: I don't know whether it's a mountaintop time or a valley time in your life. I know the mountaintop times don't last; when the disciples came down from the peak, they had to face new challenges, like a trying to help boy suffering from epilepsy. But the vision of Jesus on the mountain is something you can take with you. You can see his glory. You can exalt his greatness. And you can experience his grace, today and every day.

I don't know what pain or challenges you're facing in your life. Maybe it's your health, or a marriage that looks hopeless, or it's stress at work. Maybe it's someone you love who's struggling, or maybe financial pressures. Maybe you've made a mistake and feel like it can't ever be right again. Or maybe things are going pretty well, and there's no crisis. But I can tell you this; there will be times of challenge. Whatever the challenges might be, God says they're not the last word. Death itself is not the last word. And Jesus says to everyone who trusts in him, there is hope, and there is life. Because he is the Lord God, and he is the Suffering Servant who lays down his life for you—the one who loves you deeply, unequivocally, unshakably.

With all that, what else do you need? Maybe just a fresh vision of him.