

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY MATTHEW 17:1-13

Good morning, it is a pleasure to be with you all, and to look at God's word together. I hope you are ready to do some work in listening this morning, because we have a lot of magnificent truth to get through in Matthew 17, so I am going to jump right in.

The first thing we need to do is remind ourselves of the context leading up to the story we are going to look at this morning. Starting in Matthew 16:13-20 Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ. This is a huge moment in Matthew's gospel. Peter seems to have this breakthrough, confessing Jesus as the Christ the Son of God. This was such a big deal that Jesus promises Peter a prominent role in the building of His church. So clearly, this confession, though flawed as will be seen, was still significant.

Then in 16:21-23 Jesus begins to adjust the disciples' understanding of what it means that He is the Christ by revealing that He will need to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. Peter's confession seems to trigger this shift in Jesus' teaching, wherein He begins to explain the endgame of His ministry. Peter reveals that, while he got the general idea right, he still had some wrong beliefs about what the Christ was supposed to do when he thinks he is in a position to rebuke Jesus' suggestion that he must suffer and die. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, Peter slips into a position of thinking he has authority over Jesus. This is perhaps part of the "leaven" of Jesus had warned His disciples against earlier. In some ways, Peter's rebuke of Jesus is more ludicrous than the testing of the Pharisees and Sadducees since he acknowledges Jesus is in fact the Christ. You would think along with that acknowledgement would come the acceptance that Jesus is in absolute authority over him, but apparently not.

In 16:24-28, after revealing that He must suffer, die, and then rise, Jesus reveals that any who would follow Him would have a similar path. His disciples must give up their lives to find new ones. After this humbling reality, Jesus promises that this does not mean the kingdom will die out (as such a discipleship would seem to imply), but rather will thrive through divine power.

Try to put yourselves in the position of the disciples at this point, because Jesus has just dropped a couple of bombs on them. Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God represents a massive climax in their understanding of who Jesus is, that Matthew has been working toward through the entire book.

Earlier in Matthew 8 when Jesus calmed the storm, those who were with Him wondered, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey Him?" Notice their uncertainty. It is a question. And they think He is simply a man. Also, this comes before Jesus had even called the 12 disciples, so not all witnessed this event.

Then at the beginning of Matthew 11 Jesus clearly lets a group of people know that He is the Christ when John the Baptist sends his disciples to inquire of Jesus. But Jesus' own disciples are not even present for this exchange, having been sent out by Jesus just prior to John's disciples showing up. So, they still do not have all the pieces at this point.

Then in Matthew 14 we have Jesus walk on the water, which results in His disciples worshipping Him and declaring, "Truly you are the Son of God." Here the disciples clearly recognize His deity. Presumably, they would have also recognized Him as the Messiah at this point, but Matthew does not say for sure.

And so, when Jesus asks His disciples who they say He is, and Peter responds with "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," it is a big deal. It is at this point that the major components of Jesus' identity are clearly affirmed in the minds of the disciples. The natural expectation would be for Jesus to follow this important recognition by saying, "Okay, now that you guys really get it, let's get to work establishing the kingdom." At least, that was apparently the expectation of the disciples.

So, imagine their shock when, instead of presenting His "10-point plan for setting up the heavenly kingdom on earth", Jesus tells them He, the Christ and Son of God, is going to die imminently. Talk about deflating. And not just that, but anyone who identifies themselves as a follower of Jesus will also need to suffer and die. Which really just follows from the fact that Jesus is going to suffer and die. After all, if you follow a man heading for a cross, do not be surprised if you

end up on a cross yourself.

Jesus does leave them with a glimmer of hope at the end of chapter 16. First, He reminds them that judgement day is coming, and only those who have lost their lives for Jesus' sake will find them, and this is Jesus' rationale for them taking up their crosses at present. Then Jesus says that some of the disciples will actually see Jesus in His kingdom glory before they die. So, it is not all bad news for all of the disciples.

However, implied in Jesus' promise is the fact that the kingdom is not going to come in its fullness in the disciples' lifetimes. Either, most of them are going to die so soon that they will not be around to see the Son of Man in His kingdom, or it is going to be a sort of advanced viewing of the kingdom that only a select few will get to witness. So overall, this promise seems lackluster in contrast to the universal call to self-denial and a cross.

How would you be feeling if you were a disciple? I am guessing more than a couple of them were reevaluating their commitment. Perhaps thinking, "We were fine with leaving our homes, families, and accepting persecution when we thought it was leading to a prominent place in a powerful kingdom. But now you're saying those sacrifices only lead to a greater sacrifice? And some of us won't even get to see the kingdom in our lifetime? I'm not so sure about that deal." I am guessing many, if not all of the disciples were asking themselves, "Is this really worth it? Is Jesus worth it?"

As we turn our attention to Matthew 17 this morning, I ask you that same question: is following Jesus worth the cost? Make no mistake, following Him means a life of self-denial, a life of suffering, likely culminating in death before getting to see the kingdom established in its fullness on earth. With that in mind I ask: is Jesus worth that?

Let us look to Matthew 17 for our answer, starting with verse 1. "And after six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James, and John His brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." In this verse we see Jesus take His inner circle on a little hike. Notice that for six days Jesus lets His disciples stew in the knowledge that He is going to die, and indeed, seems determined to do so based on His reaction to Peter's rebuke. Then He takes His three closest disciples up a mountain alone.

It is unclear why Jesus only takes three men with Him. This passage is full of allusions to Moses' meeting with God on Mt. Sinai, and so some see the three disciples as representing Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu accompanying Moses up the mountain. That is one possibility. Another is that three witnesses would have been enough to substantiate the event later on, and Jesus eventually tells them to wait until after His resurrection to share what they had seen. Or it may simply be progressive revelation. Jesus, like the Father has done throughout history, is revealing the pieces of the puzzle and the steps to the plan a little at a time. Whatever the case, these three men seem to be the first fulfillment of Jesus' promise from the end of Matthew 16 that some of the disciples would see His kingdom glory before they died.

They witness that glory in verse 2. "And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light." As is the case whenever the glory of God is revealed in the Bible, the author starts reaching for words and metaphors to convey some idea of what was seen. The word translated "transfigured" is the Greek root for the English word "metamorphosis". The change then is not a veneer, but a substantial change from one type of thing to another, like that of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

Mark and Luke both record the Transfiguration as well. Mark's account is most similar to Matthew's, using the same word for the change that comes over Jesus. Yet, Mark focuses more on Jesus' clothes saying that they "became radiant, intensely white, as no launderer on earth could bleach them". It is interesting that Jesus' clothes are mentioned in all three accounts, giving the impression that the glory that emanates from Him is contagious, affecting anything that touches Him.

Luke's account varies from Matthew's and Mark's a bit. He says that Jesus' face was "altered," or it could also be translated that His face became "other than" or "of a different form or nature". Again, we have this idea that this was not a surface-level change. Jesus did not simply start glowing, He was substantially changed somehow.

And Luke describes Jesus' clothes as becoming "dazzling white." The word translated

“dazzling” literally means something like “flashed like lightning”. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament, but in other sources it apparently refers to the flash of lightning. So, this is more than a change in color. His clothes did not become “dazzlingly white,” they became dazzling white. It paints the picture of Jesus’ clothes turning into light itself, which is the idea Matthew gets at in our passage, saying, “His clothes became white as light”. It is as though Jesus exchanged His robe of fabric for a robe of white lightning.

He undergoes this substantial and glorious transfiguration, and then is joined by two prominent Old Testament figures in verse 3. “And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him.” The appearance of Moses and Elijah is significant for at least a couple reasons. First, scholars are generally agreed that their appearance represents the two major sections of the Old Testament, that of the Law and the Prophets. Moses, as the one who received the Law directly from God on Mt. Sinai represents that cornerstone of the Old Covenant: The Law. And Elijah represents the prophets as the one commonly viewed as the greatest of Old Testament prophets, who, as a group, were employed in urging Israel to uphold their covenant with Yahweh by obeying the Law.

Second, it is significant to note that Moses and Elijah stand alone as the only two Old Testament characters to have had their own mountaintop exposures to the glory of God. For both, it happened on Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb, and was accompanied by a conversation with the Lord, much like they seem to have with Jesus here. For Moses, in Exodus 34, God descends, places Moses in the cleft of the rock, passes by him in glory, proclaiming His covenant name, and describing the essence of His divine nature. For Elijah, in 1 Kings 19, as he is staying in a cave God passes by causing an earthquake, a rock-splitting wind, and a fire, although God’s glory is said to not be in those things, but instead accompanies the quietest of whispers that follows those catastrophic forces. The ESV translates the whisper simply as a “low whisper,” but it could also be translated a “thin silence”. And yet, at the sound of this thin silence Elijah covers his face with his cloak, an act reminiscent of Moses covering his face upon meeting God in the burning bush. So, here is the Old Covenant recipient of the Law and the chief prophet conversing with God in His glory atop a mountain once again, the only difference being God now has flesh and goes by the name Jesus.

Unfortunately, in verse 4 Peter has a different reaction to God’s glory than that of Moses and Elijah. “And Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.’” Instead of covering his face in humility, Peter seems to blurt out the first thing that comes into his head.

Mark and Luke both add editorial comments about Peter’s statement. Mark explains that Peter, James, and John were terrified, and Peter did not know what to say. Luke actually describes a scene similar to that which would take place in Gethsemane the night before Jesus is crucified.

He says that Jesus was praying on top of the mountain. While He prayed the three disciples struggled to stay awake. Sound familiar? So, they were apparently half asleep when Jesus was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared, leading to no small confusion on Peter’s part.

While the other two accounts are helpful for understanding the full story, it is also important to note that Matthew intentionally does not add any context or justification for Peter’s proposal to Jesus. I believe what this does is it places our focus on the statement itself. In his proposal to construct three tents, or tabernacles, Peter suggests that Jesus is on equal standing with the two Old Testament figures. As though Jesus were simply another prophet. This belies Peter’s continued failure to grasp exactly what it means that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

The Father interrupts Peter to clarify in verse 5. “He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.’” God steps in and in effect says, “Let me stop you there, Peter.” Jesus is not equal to Moses and Elijah; He is their Lord and God. And He has no need for a tabernacle, for as John 1:14 explains, the flesh the Son took on was His tabernacle, allowing His glory to dwell in the midst of men without destroying them. Jesus is the God Moses and Elijah met on the mountain, it was Him they spoke with and listened to, and so the Father tells the disciples to listen to Him as well.

It is at this revelation from the Father that realization finally dawns on Peter, James, and John, as we see in verse 6. "When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified." Hearing the Father declare His love for and pleasure in the Son, and call them to listen to Him instead of speaking, brings home the realization that they are in the presence of God, not just in the cloud around them but in the flesh before them. And as normally happens when people in the Bible find themselves in the presence of God in His glory, the disciples fall on their faces terrified.

None of their experience with Jesus to this point had prepared them for this taste of his divine nature, this glimpse inside the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle of his flesh. And I say taste and glimpse, because I actually do not think this is Christ's glory in its fullness. Reason being, John who is present here experiences Jesus' glory again in Revelation 1 and once again falls prostrate and terrified as though dead, indicating that not even witnessing the transfiguration prepared Him for the next measure of divine glory.

Mercifully, Jesus relieves their terror in verses 7-8. "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only." So much of the good news of the Bible is heard in Jesus' words "have no fear." The awesome God of the Bible tells us we don't need to fear Him. Now, being confronted with His glorious holiness does lay us bare, and reveals just how weak, unclean, and fragile we are in comparison to Him, and fear in this sense is right and good, even inevitable. In Him we rightly sense that which would consume us in our sin if it came to close, and so we tremble. For those who do not turn to Jesus, His holiness will one day consume them.

Yet, throughout Scripture He bids us not fear that consuming holiness and even protects us from it. He hides Moses in the cleft of the rock and covers him with His own hand. He shrouds His holiness in the cloud on Sinai and on the Mount of Transfiguration. He encloses His glory in the Most Holy place within the Tabernacle and Temple. He veils it in flesh that we may behold it without terror. But were He not to dispel our fear by His word of peace, the existence of such a holy God would be the most terrifying threat in the entire universe, and for those who reject that word of peace, He is the most terrifying threat in the entire universe. But that God means us good, and that is at the heart of the Gospel. And so, the disciples, timidly I am sure, raise their eyes and see Jesus as they have normally known Him, yet I think it is safe to say, with a new understanding of Him.

Following this experience Jesus tells them to keep it to themselves for the time being in verse 9. "And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, 'Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.'" As with Jesus' choice to only reveal His glory to these three disciples, it is unclear why He asks them to wait until after the resurrection to share what they witnessed. Perhaps He requests secrecy because, as is clear from the context, Jesus knows he must die, and the story of such a glorious revelation may have derailed that plan. After all, the crowds of Jerusalem come close enough to crowning Him king without knowing about this miracle. Good Friday may not have followed Palm Sunday had the masses been told of the Transfiguration. For whatever reason, throughout the Gospels Jesus clearly has a concern for the timing of certain things being revealed, and so He has here.

Finally, in verses 10-13 Jesus returns to the subject of the painful path ahead. "And the disciples asked Him, 'Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?' He answered, 'Elijah does come, and He will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize Him, but did to Him whatever they pleased. So also, the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.' Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them of John the Baptist." As I noted at the beginning, the disciples had recently gone through a theological whiplash in regard to the coming of Messiah. At first it seems like Peter hits the nail on the head, but then Jesus abruptly and forcefully rebukes Him for thinking the Messiah could not die. Then, after a few days of trying to wrap their minds around the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah, Jesus reveals His glory to them. So now, these three disciples may have understandably been wondering, "Okay, so is the Messiah a suffering servant, or the powerful Word of the Lord? Which is it?" In short, they are trying to reconcile their theology with what Jesus has recently revealed to them.

To this end, they ask about Elijah's role in all of it, since in Malachi 4 He was predicted to

precede Messiah and “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers...” So, the disciples are confused since they just saw Elijah appear on the mountain, and that does not fit with what they had grown up believing. Jesus explains that John the Baptist fulfilled the ministry of Elijah by preparing Israel for the coming of Messiah. And He ends His explanation about Elijah telling His disciples that the Christ would suffer just as Elijah in John the Baptist did. And so, after revealing His glory, Jesus ends the mountaintop experience by returning to the reality of His imminent suffering, death, and resurrection.

In this passage we have the two extremes of Jesus’ nature and role as Messiah set side-by-side. On the one hand, Jesus is the holy omnipotent God in all His glory. On the other hand, that glory is veiled in flesh, because His role at this point in salvation history is to suffer and die. It is this tension between the nature of Christ and the role He came to fulfill that the disciples have been wrestling with, and Jesus shows emphatically that they go together for they are inextricably linked by the very nature of God.

I mentioned earlier that God proclaimed the essence of His nature in Exodus 34 as He passed by Moses in the cleft of the rock. I want to read that description to you now. Exodus 34:6-7 says, “The LORD passed before Him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’” The question this description begs is: how does a God who will “by no means clear the guilty” forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin? Answer: by undergoing the pain and suffering required to expiate the guilt of sin Himself, so as to allow His steadfast love to be expressed justly. This is the Gospel: God paid the price His own justice demanded.

For us, God’s self-description to Moses seems to present an irreconcilable tension in the divine nature. How can it be? How can God be just and gracious? How can He punish sin and forgive it at the same time? The cross is the forceful and final answer to that conundrum, and the transfiguration event, in the middle of Jesus revealing that He must suffer and die, hints at that answer. Because the transfiguration reveals that Jesus is both the Savior we want, and the one we need.

You see, we all want sin to be punished. The problem of evil is real problem, and God would not be just if He did not fully punish evil. The answer to those who cannot believe in a loving God who would stand by and permit the nauseating evil that permeates creation is to agree with them. I do not believe in such a god either. I believe in the One who says, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay.” And I believe in the One who will in the end sit on the throne and say, “Behold, I am making all things new.” I believe in the God who punishes evil fully, and remakes that which evil has destroyed. We want this God of unimpeachable justice and righteousness to judge sin fully, and if you say you do not, then you simply have not understood the horror of sin. We all want sin to be punished.

But we all fear the punishment our own sin deserves. We are all suspicious that we have gotten off easily, which is why our guilt lingers. Sin goes deeper than an act. For the one who steals five dollars, repaying the money does not quite fix things, does it? We can sense that something has been unalterably harmed, and we have no means of undoing it. And so, we carry guilt around from past sins, because we feel the need for those wrongs to be made truly right. And if we are honest when we consider the cross, and hear Jesus cry out that God has forsaken Him, we recognize that is what our sin deserves. The punishment of eternal pain, abandonment, and death. And who would not be afraid of such a punishment? We all want sin to be punished, but we all fear the punishment our own sin deserves.

And so, Jesus is the Savior we want and need. The Savior that makes it possible for sin to be punished the way we all want. And the Savior that takes our place of suffering and death, so that we do not have to bear that punishment ourselves. Because man could not bear the punishment sin requires, Jesus bore it for us. God paid the price His own justice demanded.

Jesus is that God of unimpeachable justice, terrifying in His holiness, but who also suffered, died, and rose as the God of mercy and grace, who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. So,

is following Jesus worth the cost? The better question is: can you afford not to follow Jesus? He is the Savior we all want and need.

- You need to embrace two massive realities about God to know and relate to Him properly.
- First, God is holy. He is utterly other than anyone and anything else in His infinite and inexpressible goodness.
 - There is no end to His goodness.
 - It cannot be measured or exhausted.
 - So that growing in the knowledge of it, only reveals how much more there is to know.
 - You can and will never know God exhaustively but be ever in the foothills of His glory.
 - Such is His incomprehensible majesty.
- The second reality is that this holy God can be intimately known.
- God called creation out of nothing in the beginning, bestowed His image on mankind, walked in Eden with Adam and Eve, and initiated covenant relationship with Abraham.
- God revealed Himself as Yahweh to Moses, bidding Israel to call Him by His personal name.
- God chose to dwell in the midst of Israel in the Tabernacle and gave them the sacrificial system so they could be acceptable before Him.
- God took on flesh to dwell among us as Jesus.
- Jesus who touched the sick, unclean, demon-possessed masses and made them well.
- Jesus who preached the good news of the kingdom to the poor in spirit.
- Jesus who washed the feet of His disciples.
- Jesus who died, rose, ascended, intercedes, and will return for us.
- The God who will always go beyond knowledge has gone to extraordinary lengths to make it possible for us to know Him.
- And so, I leave you with two thoughts.
- One, Jesus is truly and fully God.
- The incomprehensible God of merciful love and righteous wrath; of unfathomable grace and unimpeachable justice.
- The God whose glory will always be able to make us fall on our faces terrified.
- And two, Jesus, that God, died and suffered as the Savior of the world.
 - That God, high and lifted up, emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant.
 - He suffered and died for you.
 - His love drove Him to pay the price of our sin in our place.
 - He paid the price His own justice demanded, that we may know Him as our loving Father.