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The Transfiguration: Who do you say that I am? St. Matthew 17:1-9

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“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Jesus asked his disciples. If you want to follow along with the story this morning, I’m going to begin at Matthew 16:13. In both Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels Jesus asks the same question at the same point. It’s the turning point in the gospel story. Jesus is about to set out on his final journey to Jerusalem. For three years he has travelled around Galilee and the surrounding region preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and calling God’s people to repent. His friends have followed him. They’ve seen and they’ve heard the response of the people. Most recently they’ve been in Caesarea Philippi, way to the north, a couple day’s journey beyond Galilee. And Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” I suspect he chose the location because he knew the answer to that question was exactly the sort of thing that would have made King Herod angry, exactly the sort of thing that would get him killed. And so he waited—he’s staged it this way, because he does that sort of thing a lot, he stages it to make a point—so he’s waited until they’re way up north, out of Herod’s territory and out of Herod’s grasp. The question itself turns the story in the new direction it inevitably has to go, from Galilee to Jerusalem, and ultimately to the cross. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

“They say you’re John the Baptist, or Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” That, right there, is worth stopping to take note of, because it tells us how the people perceived Jesus. They didn’t think of Jesus as a

nice guy or a do-gooder. He wasn’t “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild”. Yes, Jesus *did* good. Yes he *was* gentle—when that was appropriate—but the people saw him, first and foremost, as a firebrand, like the old prophets. They saw him as someone who wasn’t afraid to speak the word of the Lord—someone like the prophets who showed no fear as he confronted a godless king or an idolatrous high priest.

But then Jesus asks, “Who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter, always a little bit of a keener, yells out, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God!”

That needs some unpacking. First off, Jesus asks what people think of the “son of man”. That’s what he often called himself and in that he’s drawing on the imagery of Daniel 7. The son of man in Daniel represented Israel and was finally glorified and given a throne by the Ancient of Days. Even though he showed himself to be Messiah in nearly everything he did and said, in calling himself the “son of man” he was identifying himself as the Messiah and as Israel’s representative and one-day king. But then Peter’s response: “You’re the Messiah”.

Everyone in Israel was longing and praying for the Lord’s Messiah. No one knew exactly what he would be like or what he would do—well—that’s not really true. Most people knew, most people were pretty certain what the Messiah would be like and what he would do, it’s just that different groups of people had different expectations. Some people expected a great king like David, whom the Lord would send to defeat the pagan nations and to restore Israel to her rightful place on top of the heap. Other people expected a priest or prophet who would cleanse the temple and purge the priesthood and restore right worship of the Lord. Others saw a man like Moses who would reestablish *torah* amongst the people. But whoever and whatever they expected of the Messiah, one thing everyone agreed on was that he would fulfil the Lord’s promises, that

he would fulfil the scriptures, and usher in his kingdom; that he would set the world to rights; that he would make everything on earth as it is in heaven.

Peter had a clearer and sharper idea of Jesus than the general public. Peter and the disciples had been with Jesus for three years. They’d heard him preaching day after day. They’d seen all the things he had done. Consider. They had seen Jesus preaching on the mountain like *Moses*. And they’d been there when he was criticised for ministering on the sabbath and answered his critics like *King David*. They were the twelve whom he called by name, as if he were *Jacob* calling forth twelve new patriarchs. And as he confronted the world with the word of the Lord and healed the sick and raised the dead, they’d watched and couldn’t help but see him in light of the prophets of old, like *Elijah* and *Elisha*. And in light of all of that, they couldn’t help but see the Messiah—in many ways, everyone’s expectations all rolled into one: prophet, priest, and most of all: the king. God’s anointed king. Their word for that was “Messiah”.

But Peter doesn’t just say “You’re the Messiah”. He adds that the Messiah is the “son of the living God”. That needs some unpacking too. This title, “son of God”, didn’t mean quite the same thing to First Century Jews that it means to Twenty-First Century Christians. When Peter said that Jesus was the son of God, he was thinking of Old Testament passages like 2 Samuel 7, where the Lord made a promise to David about his offspring:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

Peter also would have been thinking of the words of Psalm 2:

**As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”**

I will tell of the decree:

**The LORD said to me, “You
are my Son;**

today I have begotten you.

(Psalm 2:6-7)

For Peter and the others, “son of God” was a reference to the king. And not just that, but it said something about the king’s relation to the Lord—he was the Lord’s “son” and his chosen representative. This, I think, is why Jesus asked this question when and where he did. They were a long way from Herod and an even longer way away from Caesar, but the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God, meant that the days of Herod and Caesar were numbered. That was a dangerous claim to make out loud. It also meant that Peter and the others, if they continued to follow Jesus, were signing up to be part of a prophetic movement that would challenge the authority of the rulers of the world. Jesus was giving them royal authority and making them royal heralds. This is the point of Jesus’ next words to them that are so often misunderstood:

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:18-19)

On this rock. They thought back to Jesus, preaching from the mountain like Moses, and telling the story about the wise man who built his house on the rock versus the foolish man who built on sand. We might miss the allusion there, but the Jews knew immediately that Jesus was talking about the temple, up on the rock of Mount Zion—the place where heaven

and earth met and where, some people thought, the gates of sheol, the grave, stood. And Jesus’ point is that he is building a new and better temple, this time not with brick and mortar. This time the Lord’s temple will be a people made up of everyone who gives their allegiance to the Lord’s king—everyone who, with Peter, declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God.

If there was ever good news, this is it. I imagine some of the disciples sitting there and thinking that now that this is in the open, maybe they ought to get busy raising an army so they can march on Jerusalem and set Jesus on the throne. But instead, Jesus warns them in verse 20: “Don’t tell anyone that I’m the Messiah.” It’s a strange juxtaposition. And, at least from the disciples’ perspective, it gets stranger. Matthew writes that:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21)

This is the part where Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, “Jesus! That isn’t Messiah talk! This will never happen to you!”

Do you remember the part of the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where the children finally meet Aslan. Everyone is thrilled. For centuries the people of Narnia hoped and prayed for their king to return to defeat the White Witch. Now he’s finally landed in Narnia, he’s gathered his army—and the prophesied sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve have even arrived. The prophecies are fulfilled, it’s the eve of the great battle, and everyone knows that the King will defeat the Witch and set everything to rights. Celebration is in the air, because though there’s a battle coming, they know that with Aslan they will win. But everyone also notices that something’s wrong with Aslan and, in

the middle of the night, Susan and Lucy follow him as he walks off by himself. They watch as he’s met by the Witch and her minions at the stone table. And at first they think he’s going to win the battle early and single-handedly. But, instead, he just stands there and lets the witch bind him, and shave off his mane, and humiliate him, and then kill him. And when everyone’s left, Susan and Lucy sit next to Aslan’s body and they weep for hours, thinking it’s over and that everything’s been lost. I suspect Peter felt a bit like that. Jesus was the Messiah. Peter said it and Jesus agreed. Jesus congratulates him on his insight and claps him on the back and announces that it’s time to go to Jerusalem. And everyone knew that meant it was time for Jesus to defeat his enemies and take his throne. Imagine the smiles and the excitement. But then Jesus says that he’s going to Jerusalem to die. That part about dying rang so powerfully in Peter’s ears that he missed the rest about rising from the dead. “No, Jesus! Don’t talk like that! Don’t betray your own cause! I know a lot—even most—people have rejected you, but you’re the Messiah. We’re on a mission from God. We’ll win. We can’t lose.”

And Jesus stops Peter and rebukes him. In fact, he rebukes him with the same powerful words he rebuked the Satan with in the wilderness:

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Matthew 16:23)

They had the Messiah bit right. They’d seen Jesus as Moses and as King David and as Jacob and as the prophets, but having seen that, they should have seen further. Jesus was embodying his people and ultimately, to make them right with the Lord, it also meant dying the death they deserved for their unfaithfulness. Jesus had to follow the story of Israel

through all the way to the bitter end. In a short time they would see Jesus as Israel's atoning lamb. Moses, Jacob, David, Elijah...they were all part of the story Jesus came to embody, but it couldn't be fulfilled without the lamb at the very end.

And this has implications not only for Jesus, but for his people. He goes on in verses 24-28 with the words we know so well.

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

Again, Jesus knew that he was likely to die on a Roman cross. He knew that, because it's what the Romans did to rebellious Jews and Jesus knew that as Israel's Messiah, he would not only embody their father, their law-giver, their king, and their prophets, but also their death if they did not repent. And here he reminds the disciples that the vocation of the Messiah is also the vocation of his people. We can feel the darkness hanging over the conversation, but then the light breaks through the clouds again as Jesus goes on:

“For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Jesus switches from “son of God” back to “son of man”, that Israel character in Daniel—the one who would ascend on the clouds, from earth to heaven, to be presented before the Ancient of Days—to be “given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and

languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:14).

This whole thing is a bewildering back and forth: victory, defeat, and victory again. Imagine poor Peter, praised one day for his faith and for affirming Jesus as Messiah and then next rebuked with those words, “Get behind me, satan!” And Jesus making it clear in no uncertain terms that he must die. And if that wasn't enough, that the disciples should take up their crosses and follow him to their own deaths. But now Jesus says, “Don't worry. I'm not only the Messiah, but I'm also Daniel's son of man—remember him? I told you that even though I must die, I will rise on the third day, and you will live to see me ascend on the clouds to my heavenly throne. I will be vindicated by my Father. And that means that you will be vindicated too for my sake. My kingdom is coming and it really *will* be on earth as in heaven.

This was all a lot to take in and I expect their heads were spinning with it all. They'd got pretty good at putting two and two together as they watched Jesus, but now he was heaping things on. No one thought of the Messiah this way, but they were seeing that all the pieces were there in the scriptures. In 17:1 Matthew tells us that six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Six days. Processing time. Time to think all of this through. If they were anything like us, I suspect they'd been thinking a lot on what Jesus had said about his death and even more about them taking up their own crosses and following him. I suspect they were thinking on those things a lot more than the bit about Jesus rising from the grave and ascending to his throne. I think those were six grim days of dreary reflection. But then Jesus took them up a mountain. They could see Galilee spread out below them, the place where they had been ministering

with Jesus for three years. It was a reminder that it was time to move on, time to make that last journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. And they started to think about all the things he'd been saying a week before. How much had they managed to sort out in their heads? And then something amazing happened and whatever dark clouds had been hanging over their hearts were burned away by the glory of the Lord. In 17:2-3 Matthew says:

[Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

As they watched, Jesus changed. His clothes, travel-stained and worn, shone like white light and his face shone like the sun. And it wasn't just Jesus blazing with light. Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus and, in his account, Luke says that they too blazed with the same glory. And seeing this, Peter blurts out:

“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.”

Whatever doubts they had about Jesus as Messiah in light of all of his talk about rejection and death, all those doubts were driven away by this image of glory. But Peter still doesn't want to go to Jerusalem. He still doesn't want Jesus to die. And here's the answer. They can build three tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah and they can all stay right here. Jesus can rule from here and all Israel can make a pilgrimage up the mountain to see that he's really the Messiah. And here are Moses and Elijah to prove it. But that's not the answer. That was never Israel's vocation and it's not Jesus'. And this mount way up north was never meant to be the Messiah's throne. And before Peter can get all the words out the Lord himself speaks:

[Peter] 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.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. 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. (Matthew 17:5-8)

This is my son. We’re back to the Messiah, the Lord’s king. In the midst of the disciples’ confusion and questions and doubt, the Lord assures them that no matter what happens, no matter where this story takes Jesus and no matter where this story will take them, Jesus is his son, the anointed king, and everything will turn out all right in the end. The kingdom will come—on earth as in heaven. Jesus will be vindicated and so will they. “Just listen to him,” says the Lord. Trust him. He knows what he’s doing and I am with him. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid for him. And don’t be afraid to take up your own crosses and to follow where he leads, don’t be afraid to take up your crosses and to follow where the gospel will lead you.

And the cloud lifted and they looked up, and there was Jesus. No Moses. No Elijah. No more blazing glory. Just Jesus. But after that they were ready to take up their crosses and to follow him to Jerusalem. Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, Israel’s greatest prophet had stood there with Jesus, uniting him with Israel’s story, connecting him with their ministry. Here was Jesus, prophet and priest and then the Lord’s announcement: This is my son. Jesus is the anointed king as well. Prophet, priest, and king. And in the dark days ahead, they disciples had that vision of Jesus glorified. Some say that the Transfiguration was a revelation of the divinity of Jesus, but since Moses and Elijah shone with the same light, I don’t think that really fits. A few chapters earlier, quoting

Daniel, Jesus said that the Lord’s people would shine like stars in his kingdom. What the Transfiguration reveals is the glory of Jesus’ perfect humanity as he sets his face towards the cross—a glory he will one day share with those who take up their crosses and follow him. The Transfiguration prefigures the cross—two mountains and two very different scenes, but when the disciples were tempted to despair over the scene on Mount Calvary, Matthew (and Mark and Luke) remind us of the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration. On Mount Calvary Jesus is revealed in shame, but on the Mount of Transfiguration he is revealed in glory. On Mount Calvary we see Jesus stripped naked, soldiers throwing dice for his clothes and on the Mount of Transfiguration we see him clothed in brilliant white. On Mount Calvary we see him between two violent revolutionaries, symbols of Israel’s faithlessness and on the Mount of Transfiguration we see him between Moses and Elijah, between the embodiment of the law and the prophets, symbols of faithfulness. On Mount Calvary dark clouds blot out the sun and on the Mount of Transfiguration the bright clouds of heaven shine their light. On Mount Calvary a Roman soldier solemnly declares that surely this was God’s son, confirming what was echoed from the clouds as the Lord spoke on the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is my son”.

Brothers and Sisters, on the Mount of Transfiguration it’s as if we’re given a glimpse of heaven’s view of Mount Calvary. What looked from a human perspective like the worst day in the world, when it looked as though sin and death had done their worst and won, Jesus was, in fact, on that cross revealed in all his glory and was never loved so much by his Father. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked. And people have all sorts of answers: good teacher, reformer, revolutionary, prophet, myth. But the gospel story reveals him as the Messiah, the son of

the living God. He is prophet, priest, and king who fulfils the story of his people as the lamb who died for their sins. More than anything else, we see in the lamb just what kind of king Jesus is. In him we see the faithfulness, the goodness, the loving-kindness of God, whose glory shines brightest when he gives himself for the sake of his people, when he turns death into life. Think on that, Brothers and Sisters, as you come to his Table this morning to eat the bread and drink the wine, remembering his body broken and his blood shed. Here we see his glory in all its fullness. Here we see his faithfulness, that we might go out from this place, taking up our own crosses and following him—our faithfulness inspired by his. Come to the Table and hear the Father’s words: “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”

Let’s pray: O God, who on the holy mount revealed to chosen witnesses your only-begotten Son, wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening: Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may be permitted to behold the King in his beauty; who with you, O Father, and you, O Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*