

Matthew 17:1-9
February 3, 2008

South Plains
Transfiguration

Transfiguration For Us

Not long ago, we lost a planet because the astronomers decided that Pluto really does not fit the proper definition of a planet. It was the ancient Greeks who gave us the name “planets” which literally means “wanderers.” The name was appropriate because ancient astronomers could predict the movement of the stars, but they could not predict the movement of the planets. The planets did not fit into their calculations.

The wandering rabbi from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, did not fit into the calculations of the ancient Jews either. He taught the scriptures, but with new interpretations. He worshiped the God of the Jews, but did not approve the Temple worship of his day. He relieved suffering, but he frequently did this work on the Sabbath. His disciples were often as baffled by their leader as his opponents. Thus, when the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ ministry, chapters sixteen and seventeen become critical for revealing who Jesus is and what he is about.

In Matthew 16:16, Simon Peter confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” At the beginning of chapter seventeen, a voice from heaven confirms Peter’s confession: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

Lots of people today find Christian values attractive and many might follow Jesus on a mountain top retreat to Wintergreen, but they hold back from worshiping Jesus or from serving him in the church. At 6:30 this evening, millions of us will admire the athletes of the Super Bowl and their dedication to the game. But, most of us will not commit ourselves to even a moderate program of exercise. We will come close to the glories of the game, but we will remain spectators, like Peter and James and John.

That’s what the three disciples were when they went up the mountain by themselves with Jesus. They are a part of Jesus’ ministry in many ways, but they are not really in the game. Jesus knows they’re not ready. He wants to take them one step closer to a full understanding of his mission, and one step closer to full-hearted participation in his work. I suppose he could have taken more of his followers, but full disclosure would have to wait for Jerusalem. So, he took only the core members of his band.

Once removed from the distractions of the towns, the business of the markets, the questions of the curious, the three disciples were privileged to see Jesus in a new way. I believe we all need to get away from our routine once in a while, not just for fun, but for recreation in the most fundamental sense: for the re-creation of our souls. We need quiet times to put our lives in order, to see beauty without all the advertising adjectives, to wait upon the presence of God.

It was not unusual for Jesus to pull apart from the crowds that followed him everywhere. He needed time to pray. On this occasion, he wanted time with those closest to him so that they could share at least a glimmer of the glory of communion with Almighty God. Light permeated his figure until his clothes dazzled. His face shone like the sun. And, he was not alone. Moses and Elijah, two towering figures from the long history of Israel were seen talking with Jesus. A bright cloud enveloped the little group and a voice from the cloud spoke: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well-pleased; listen to him!"

We could argue all day about the "how" and "what" of this vision. What matters is that Peter, James and John had the experience and passed it on to us. I'm interested in the more prosaic details, the little facts that Matthew's Gospel inserts almost casually, facts and details that add perspective.

Detail number one: The transfiguration happened six days later. Six days after Peter's confession. Six days after a promise Jesus makes that "some standing here [with him] who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (16:28)." Six days and then we have arrived at the Sabbath. Those three disciples got a glimpse of the kingdom that day.

Detail number two: When the disciples fell to the ground in fear before that voice they rightly assumed was

God speaking, "Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid (17:7).'" Worship in the presence of God can be both glorious and fearful. In the end, we need Jesus to touch us and reassure us. "Get up and do not be afraid" of the work God gives you.

Detail number three: When it's all over, Jesus says, "Tell no one (17:9)." Why? Because no one was ready to hear and the disciples were not ready to understand what they had seen and heard. God's time was not right, but it was drawing near. They needed to be ready.

Detail number four: What the disciples heard was a clear affirmation of the authority of their master. "Listen to him!" That's the bottom line for disciples, then and now.

Not until after the resurrection would the disciples be able to believe that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Not until after they had seen the power of God bring life out of death could they overcome their fear. Not until after Jesus had been sacrificed for speaking truth to power would his words burn in their hearts with the flame of love. Jesus' momentary transfiguration on the mountain was a preview of his glory after the resurrection.

For thousands of years, astronomers could calculate and predict the position of the stars, but despite rather sophisticated observations and measurements,

they could not predict the movement of the planets. Johannes Kepler in the seventeenth century was finally able to reconcile their observations with a mathematical model that correctly predicted and explained their orbits. The key to understanding the planets turned out to be a simple change in perspective. Kepler realized that the planets orbited around the sun, not around the earth. It took a while for people to accept the fact that our planet was not the center of the universe, but that is indeed the fact.

In a similar way, the disciples had to come to the realization that Jesus was not only a brilliant teacher. He was the source of wisdom. He was not a wandering rabbi. He was and is the center of faith. Jesus is the Son of God, God in the flesh, the definitive word about divinity, the final word about the nature of God.

When we gather to celebrate communion, we gather around Jesus. We are guests at his table. Our lives fall into their proper order when he is given first place. Our universe begins to make sense. We ourselves are transfigured. Our lives are changed because our perspective changes, making Jesus our center. We don't know everything and we will still face questions we cannot answer. Even after the experience on the mountain, the disciples had to face the crucifixion with all its uncertainty, fears and soul-wrenching whys.

Faith in Jesus Christ means that we have put him at the center of our questions. We can trust him with our

fears. We can follow him despite the unanswered questions. Because we have caught a glimpse of his glory and understood just enough of who he is. He is our friend and savior, our example for life and our Lord. He is our entre` into the presence of God,.