

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
February 21, 2010

Testimonies to Jesus as Messiah...
Witnessed by Disciples

Matthew 17:1-12

Key verse: “He [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2).

A nurse gave the following account of an incident at her hospital: “I neglected to tell my new patient, a little boy, how his hospital room intercom worked. Soon his light flashed. I called his name and asked what he wanted. There was complete silence. I repeated myself. After a long pause he said, ‘Jesus, I hear you, but I don’t see you. Where are you?’ I couldn’t wait to get to his room and give him a hug.” (Mary Williamson in *Today’s Christian Woman*)

A voice from heaven...visitors from the ancient past...face shining like the sun. Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration may seem as puzzling to us as the unseen intercom voice was to that little boy. Yet, this divine revelation of Jesus’ identity was of tremendous importance to Jesus’ disciples. This event was so significant, in fact, that, years later, Peter would recount with deep awe what happened on the mountain. Peter cited his eyewitness account of the Transfiguration as evidence of his apostolic authority:

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the excellent glory: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Let’s look at Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration.

Following Peter’s confession of Jesus’ identity at Caesarea Philippi, the Transfiguration confirmed the accuracy of Peter’s confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). There on the mountain, the three disciples were given a glimpse of our Lord’s divine nature. They saw clearly that Jesus was more than a teacher, more than a prophet—He was and is the incarnate Son of God. This is how Matthew described what the disciples saw: “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Mt. 17:2).

Verse 3 says, “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.” What is the significance? Moses was the first great law giver. Elijah was the first great prophet in Israel. Their presence, talking with Jesus on the mountain, likely signified that, in Jesus, God’s law and the message of the prophets are fulfilled.

Verses 5-6 recount the voice of God, the Father, saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Adding to what the disciples are *seeing*, now God the Father *speaks* his affirmation of Jesus’ Messianic identity. The Father testifies that Jesus is more than prophet or teacher—Jesus is the divine Son of God.

It is interesting to note that this affirmation from God the Father is nearly identical to the affirmation He gave at Jesus’ baptism: “When He [Jesus] had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him....And suddenly a voice came from heaven saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:16-17).

Later, as Jesus and the three disciples were coming down from the mountain: “Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’” (Mt. 17:9). Why did Jesus give this instruction? The likely answer is that Jesus knew the disciples still lacked a full understanding of his identity that would only come to them following his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus knew that the disciples could not yet understand or adequately explain what they had experienced on the mountain. So, he told them to “tell no one” until after the resurrection.

The passage ends with Jesus and the three disciples discussing Elijah’s role in the coming of Jesus the Messiah (Mt. 17:10-12). In Jesus’ day, the Jewish teachers believed, based on Malachi 4:5-6, that Elijah the prophet must reappear before the Messiah could be revealed. Jesus explained to the disciples that John the Baptist had taken on Elijah’s prophetic role—calling for repentance, preparing the way for Jesus the Messiah.

What an experience Peter, James, and John must have had on the mountain at the Transfiguration. Somehow, it is hard to believe that a short while later Peter would deny that he ever knew Jesus. And the other disciples, following Jesus’ crucifixion, would be hiding in fear.

Yet, I have to admit that I too often have walked in their shoes. I have been blessed with my own “mountain top” experiences. Jesus was so real in those moments of inspiration. How could I ever doubt? Then life called me back down to the valley—the “real world” with its cynicism, suffering, and unbelief. And my faith was tested.

It is in those moments, in the dark valleys of life, that God has taught me this invaluable life lesson: *Never doubt in the valley what you've seen and heard on the mountain.*

Thanks be to God!

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