

## Mountains, Prophets, Message, and Cross

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The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Transfiguration Sunday  
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“Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.” – Matthew 17:3

I have taken as my text the third verse of the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: “Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.” That’s what Jesus’s disciples saw; the question for us is, What do we see? What do we see when we look at Jesus, the Christ?

As you know, I’ve been experimenting of late with the number of lessons we read out on Sunday morning. Sometimes we have the three appointed by the lectionary, sometimes we have two, sometimes we have one. I began this experiment to see if I could help you focus on what I understood to be the theme of the day after I’d read the lessons myself. It’s not often clear what the thread of continuity is that the compilers of the lectionary saw connecting the three lessons for any given Sunday. I also rarely preach on all three lessons, because by the time I’ve said something about one lesson that I consider worth listening to, I’ve used up all my time and all of your patience.

But this morning I wanted you to hear the reading from Exodus so that you would hear of another prophet going up a mountain to receive divine revelation, and I wanted you also to hear 2 Peter’s commentary on what Matthew’s gospel preserves for us. Listen again:

Exodus 24:12; 2 Peter 1:18; Matthew 17:1.

What I see in those three lessons is two mountains, three prophets, one lesson, and an impending cross, because the Transfiguration is the pivotal moment in the story of Jesus when his preaching, teaching, and healing ministry on earth is about to end, and his passion is about to begin – when the cross, in other words, begins to cast its shadow over his life.

If we’d had time this morning for another Old Testament lesson, I would have had Rick read for you the story of Elijah fleeing Queen Jezebel. From that story, here’s the significant verse for this morning, 1 Kings 19:11. Here’s what it says: “He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’”

Three prophets – Moses, Elijah, Jesus – two mountains – Mt. Sinai/Horeb and the unknown mountain of Transfiguration – one message – faithfulness to the God of the Bible – and a cross that is the coming fate of the third of those three prophets. Let’s look at the first of those figures for whom Peter wanted to build booths, Moses.

Moses is the shaper of biblical religion. The religion that you and I are part of, Christianity, is rooted in Mosaic Yahwism. It was Moses who received God’s proper name, Yahweh, at the burning bush, and it was Moses who was empowered to organize a bunch of

Hebrew slaves into the people of God, and it was Moses who received the divine revelation on Mt. Sinai that became the blueprint for that nation of priests – a blueprint that demanded justice, honesty, fairness, integrity, and a host of other requirements that you and I have such difficulty with.

Those requirements – commandments, the Bible commonly calls them – don't just allow people to live together; they are the instruction manual for a people on a mission, namely, the mission given to Abraham and Sarah to begin a line of people who would be a blessing to the world and who would help the world become a blessing to itself. The Ohio Revised Code is a collection of laws designed to help us to live together peacefully; the Bible's laws, in contrast, are designed to help us change the world. That's what it means to be a blessing – it means to be an agent of change for the better. We have a job to do that began with our monotheistic ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, and it was Moses who received the instructions on how to do that job well.

So one of the people the disciples see Jesus talking to is Moses, the shaper of biblical religion.

The second person the disciples see Jesus talking to is Elijah, the great prophet who was called by God about 850 years before Jesus to correct Mosaic religion when it had gone off the rails and Israel was living through one of its lowest points. Moses was the great shaper of biblical religion; Elijah was the great reformer when that religion had become corrupt.

King Ahab reigned from 869 to 850, give or take a few years. He took as his most influential wife Jezebel, the daughter of the King of Tyre and thus a Phoenician princess. It was a political marriage, of course, and it wasn't the first time that an Israelite king had married a foreign wife. But Jezebel insisted that her family's religion, which venerated the god Baal rather than Yahweh, become the official religion of Israel. Ahab agreed, which caused outrage among the adherents of Mosaic Yahwism. Elijah was summoned by God to confront Ahab and Jezebel, which he did in the famous show-down on Mt. Carmel with the 450 prophets of Baal. After Elijah wins that contest, he orders the execution of Jezebel's prophets, enraging the queen, who puts a bounty on his head. He flees to Mt. Horeb, another name for Sinai, where he experiences God's "still, small voice" after God appears in the earthquake, wind, and fire. That voice tells him to go back and continue to call the people of Israel, including their king, back to the faith of the Great I Am.

Elijah's role was not to shape Yahwism, it was to use Yahwism to speak truth to power. That's the way all prophetic figures have used biblical religion, because the God of the Bible is a jealous God who will tolerate no rivals – no other gods, no other religion, no king, no president, no country, no army, no political ideology, no family – nothing. The God of the Bible demands ultimate loyalty in exchange for eternal life. Here's the way it works (Matthew 22:36-40).

'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'

Jesus: ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"

Do you hear the echo of the first commandment Moses gave the Israelites in those words? Do you hear the words of Elijah to King Ahab in Jesus's words to that lawyer? Do you

see Jesus as he saw himself and as his contemporary followers first saw him, as a prophet in the tradition of Moses and Elijah?

Jesus saw himself not so much as Moses, but more as Elijah – the corrector of a great religion that had lost its way under bad leadership. That’s why he referred to his Jewish co-religionists as “the lost sheep of Israel.” Jesus believed that they had been led astray by bad shepherds, just as Ahab had led their ancestors astray many centuries before.

And at that low ebb in Israelite history and religion, God summoned Elijah to speak truth to power, to call the people of God back to the God of mercy, justice, peace, and truth. In every generation, at every low ebb, God summons someone of faith to show us the path and to lead us back.

What were Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about? Probably this: that if he were to persist in his mission of trying to save the lost sheep of Israel from their own waywardness and from the self-serving depredation of their leaders, he must prepare himself to pay a terrible price. As Jesus himself had said earlier in his ministry, No prophet is without honor except in his own town (Mark 6:4).

The cross was the price Jesus paid for his prophetic mission. The cross was the price he paid for speaking truth to power – the truth of biblical religion to the power of entrenched religious and political leadership. Jesus paid the price for having the courage of his convictions, as all prophets have.

Years ago, when I taught the story of Dorothy Day, the great Catholic social activist, to a group of high schoolers, the students were fans of Day’s until they read in her autobiography that she had chained herself to the fence surrounding the White House to protest women’s lack of the franchise. She was arrested, of course, for trespassing, as I myself was one Good Friday when I roped myself to the fence outside the Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut, to protest our government’s manufacturing of nuclear submarines.

I didn’t mention my own arrest to the students, and I’m glad I didn’t, because those ninth graders suddenly turned hostile toward Dorothy Day because she’d broken the law. In their minds, shaped so profoundly by their mostly law-abiding parents and grandparents, someone who breaks the law, even for a cause they believe to be higher than the law, is never justified. My very conservative students felt that it was always wrong to operate outside the law.

Jesus, you will recall, was crucified because he broke the law. Jesus was crucified as a criminal, as a corrupter of biblical religion and as a traitor to the state. Is that fate, perhaps, what Moses and Elijah were telling Jesus he should prepare himself for? Matthew doesn’t tell us what the disciples heard from Moses and Elijah, only what they saw when they looked at Jesus.

And so we return to the question the Bible puts to us on this Transfiguration Sunday: When you look at Jesus, the Christ, who do you see?

Do you see a power capable of changing your life and the world for the better? If so, how will you help God make that change happen?

Do you see a devout adherent of biblical religion, the embodiment – the incarnation – of everything that Moses tried to shape and everything that Elijah tried to reform?

Do you see the one so transparent to the divine that the disciples heard a voice telling them that this one whom they had followed was of the same substance and essence – “This is my Son” – as that cosmic heart that beats at the center of the universe?

Is that what you see? We know what the disciples saw then; what do we disciples see now? That’s the question. What answer will you give, not with your lips, but with your life? Consider carefully, because it’s the most important question you’ll ever answer.