

## Transfiguration (23Feb2020)

Matt17:1-9

Moses and Elijah. Kind of a big deal.

They were the two main figures from Scripture. The whole Hebrew Bible was summarized as “the law and the prophets.”

Moses was the guy for the law, getting to talk to God on the mountaintop, receiving the tablets of Commandments, guiding the people’s life into the Promised Land, out of slavery and into freedom.

Elijah was the greatest of the prophets, dueling against worshippers of other gods, standing against evildoer kings and queens, standing up for God and the people when the powers seemed so oppressive, seeking God’s way during a difficult time of idolatry, apostasy, selfishness.

So the careers of these two Bible superstars were really something.

Generally I’ve figured that having the two of them up on the mountain with Jesus was supposed to establish or verify his credibility. Kind of like endorsements in political races, that if an assemblywoman and former school board president endorse a candidate, that one must have some worth. Though if these were the prime celebrities of our Old Testament, then maybe it’s like a Hall of Fame. Like if Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron were hanging around the baseball diamond and they pointed with excitement toward a young prospect. (Maybe \*Barry Bonds would’ve been trying to horn in from the baseball bleachers and maybe King David was hanging out behind a rock trying to claim he qualified for the Transfiguration mountaintop, too.)

Along those lines, I’ve often viewed this story as recognizing our tradition’s being impressed by Elijah and Moses, the two scriptural mega heroes, and this vision of the Transfiguration goes on to emphasize that Jesus shines brighter and dazzles more, and God’s voice comes interrupting specifically to direct you to listen to Jesus, the beloved Son.

But this week, in what we’re listening for, I found myself wondering a different point of this miraculous moment in the middle of Matthew. It was because I was thinking less about the storied stats in those scriptural superstar careers, less about how amazing the lives of Moses and Elijah had been, and more about their endings.

For Moses, his ending came right at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. The rest of his people were about to complete the exodus from Egypt and at long last come to their permanent home. They were on the east bank of the Jordan River on Mount Nebo looking toward the mountains of Palestine. Moses led them the whole way, and he would not get there with them, but he’s been to the mountaintop.

Deuteronomy ends with Moses handing off his role and power to his successor Joshua, and then he died 120 years old with undimmed eyes. The unusual ending is even more that God was the one to bury Moses someplace. Later stories went on that the angel Michael took Moses’ body up to heaven or that Moses hadn’t actually died and was claimed by God. A pretty special end of life.

If Moses seems not-so-standard, that the only one at his funeral was God, who also served as undertaker, or maybe an angel who served as whatever exhumers is opposite of undertaker (overbringer?), if those Moses details were wild, then the ending of Elijah at the start of the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings was maybe even wilder. He’s walking along with *his* successor Elisha, who refused to leave him. Elijah smacked the Jordan River with his cloak, and the water parted and they went through on dry ground and about then “As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.”

Here on the Transfiguration mountain, we have Elijah of the “swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry him home,” Elijah who was claimed straight by God and never died.

On the mountain, we have Moses, the only one the LORD knew face-to-face. Moses who walked so closely with God that maybe God walked him right into the grave. Moses with “a

band of angels comin' after him, comin' for to carry him home."

Two guys who didn't have a very standard human ending, who didn't have death and burial like we expect, who didn't have grief and loss and sadness and the decomposition of their flesh. Two holy guys, connected to God, and for that connection and that holiness apparently earning a different sort of ending. A happy ending.

And then we have Jesus.

Jesus who has just begun talking about his crucifixion. About being rejected. About being spit on. About being jailed and tortured. Condemned by the empire to their most shameful form of execution. Lots and lots and lots of suffering. And death.

If we thought this whole thing were about avoiding death, that if we could get close to God then it would keep suffering far away, and happiness close, if we viewed biblical high-rollers like Elijah and Moses as models of holiness in miraculous final escapes, then Jesus is going to point toward something entirely different. He could seem like the opposite of big deal characters Elijah and Moses. Yet in this mountaintop moment, we are pointed to Jesus and assured of his connection to God. His crucifixion won't be a smudged mark that he is separated from God, abandoned, forsaken. As he heads directly into suffering and death, even as he is abandoned by humans, it is unmistakable that God remains steadfastly with him. He identifies God's presence for us.

This amazing vision of the Transfiguration isn't an escape from everyday life. Nor is it a hint of resurrection to come (since there's no indication that Jesus will be glowing on Easter. The best portrayals will say he still looks pretty darn crucified, with holes punched in him.) If you thought the end of life for Moses and for Elijah portrayed some amazing relationship with God, even though the end of this life of Jesus will seem so awful and wrong and like everything you'd want to avoid, still in death God is with Jesus and Jesus is God with us.

In what this means for us, I also want to point

to two words in the reading. The first is for when the three followers of Jesus fall on their faces afraid. That word for falling prostrate is the same one for when Jesus will pray just before his betrayal and arrest, his trial and death, when he's in the garden of Gethsemane. He throws himself to the ground and prays to avoid it—"let this pass from me."

This story today seems less glorious or happy as it says that, as we witness Jesus and this path toward his death, we too fall down in tearful cries asking that it need not be this way.

The response from Jesus today is a word that is also how God responds to the death of Jesus. Jesus says, "get up. Rise." It's the word for resurrection. Jesus gets up from the dead, is raised. It doesn't mean the suffering disappears, that the hard is simply undone or ignored. It does mean God has something more to say.

Through it all, it's worth remembering Jesus' assurance "Don't be afraid." It may not be pretty, you may fall, tremble. But still Jesus comes to touch you. The divine word is with you: Rise. Get up. Live. God is with you.

That is worth Alleluias always.