

We return to our Matthew Series in Matthew 17. How many of us have been fooled by appearances? Several years ago, Julie and I moved to a smaller city in Wisconsin and after we unpacked and got situated with our new church, we decided to take in the local cuisine. We had a few chain restaurants like Arby's and Subway, but our favorite was Applebee's. We also had one little Mexican food restaurant in town. Now you need to understand the town we were living in had mostly Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes. And they considered themselves culturally diverse. There was a lot to love about living where we did. We made lifelong friends. But one downside was these Scandinavians didn't have good Mexican food. Good Norwegian Lefsa for sure, but no salsa and guacamole to be found anywhere. We had one Mexican restaurant in town, which we tried once. It went out of business and I think people cheered.

A few months later, another family moved to our community and opened up a Mexican restaurant on that same site and named it Casa Mexicana. When we saw the sign "grand opening," Julie and I took our kids on a Friday night. With low expectations, we showed up. It looked pretty much the same but it had a different menu. When we sat down, the server brought us chips and salsa. And when we tasted that salsa we went to salsa heaven. Things are not always what they seem to be. There we were, living in Northern Wisconsin and enjoying the best salsa we ever tasted. I think we were the only patrons in the restaurant that night. While we dined on fresh guacamole, shredded beef tacos, and fajitas, we knew this place was going to catch on. Within a month, on a Friday night you had to wait for a table at Casa Mexicana. Northern Wisconsin Scandinavians had fallen in love with good Mexican cuisine. Since then, they have opened up two other restaurants in neighboring towns. It's an American success story.

And as Shakespeare said, "Things are not always what they seem." Or as Edwin Rolf said, "You can't judge a book by its cover." I want us to see today that things are not always what they seem as it relates to Jesus. And I want us to see things are not always what they appear to be in the Kingdom of God. And maybe it's God's grace to us that some of us just need to catch a glimpse of God's glory because we are discouraged. We look out at our world and need to hear from God, these encouraging words, "Things out there are not always as they seem." You need to know there is another kingdom and it's God's kingdom.

As we return to Matthew, a bit of background history. Matthew is writing to an audience of Jewish followers of Jesus around

the middle of the first century. Matthew's purpose is to show Jesus brings the story of God's people together. He is telling us Jesus is the culmination and fulfillment of the Jewish hope for God to bring about His new kingdom. In our story in Matthew 17, we will see several links back to the Jewish story in the Old Testament. Specifically to our passage, Jesus told his followers He would go to Jerusalem to die. His disciples seemed shocked by the news. Peter had seen Jesus feed 5,000, calm a storm, walk on water, and heal the sick, including Peter's mother-in-law. And in chapter 16, Jesus praised Peter because at a place called Caesarea Philippi Peter had correctly confessed Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, and that He was building his Kingdom.

And right after that pinnacle moment, Jesus dropped a bomb. He told his disciples he would die at the hands of evil men for his kingdom to come. The disciple's thought and hoped Jesus was just going to march into Jerusalem and sit on the throne forever and at that moment every knee, including Herod's and Caesar's would bow down before him. Instead Jesus told them that for his kingdom to be established he was going to have to die, and his followers were going to have a hard road too. To follow Christ, they too would have to take up their crosses, deny themselves, and follow him.

So his disciples processed what Jesus said to them. They no doubt were trying to focus on Jesus words and what they meant. They were likely anxious and afraid of what lay ahead for Jesus and them. Matthew tells us six days passed and I think the disciples watched Jesus more closely than ever before. They listened to him and they contemplated the cost of what it meant to truly follow him.

We are in an amazing piece of scripture for this message. We will read about Jesus' closest disciples literally getting a glimpse of Jesus in a new light. They were going to see that with God, things are not always as they may appear. They would see their friend, their teacher, and their Lord appear before them in a way no one had ever seen Jesus appear.

Our hope for our own personal transformation, for our culture, His church up and down this peninsula, and across the world is to dial in on one objective, which is to focus on Jesus, as we listen to his words, follow him, and see him revealed in the scriptures. We pick up our story in Matthew chapter 17 beginning in verse 1.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. (Matthew 17:1)

Why did Matthew see it important to include the phrase, "after six days?" I think He wants us to relate six days to another mountain top experience, where Moses was on the mountain and the cloud of God's glory covered it, and after six days the Lord's voice called out to Moses. He wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses, the new exodus from slavery into freedom, the new lawgiver. Why three, why not all the disciples? Because in both the Old and New Testaments, official testimony was established by the evidence of 2–3 witnesses. So we have three eyewitnesses and these three were his inner three. As we will see, it was important they keep it a secret. We'll see Jesus was closest to these three and we will see these three would become pillars of the church.

Mountains matter in Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus prayed on a mountain, he fed 5000 on a mountain, He will teach on the Mt. of Olives, and He was tempted on a mountain. Mountains come into play from the false glory offered by the devil, to the true glory we are about to see. We are not sure which mountain he transformed on, but many scholars believe it was probably Mt. Hermon, which is the highest and most secluded mountain. It stands about 9,200 feet above sea level and it was about a six-day walk from Caesarea Philippi. Today there is ski run down Mt. Hermon.

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. (verse 2)

Transfigured is a big word. In English, we think of another big word, metamorphosis. Luke's account in chapter nine says Jesus was praying and was changed. Jesus changed in his outward and physical appearance. His face got as bright as the sun. He didn't change into another being. He remained fully human but with a self-producing, and self-projecting light. What was all the brightness about? It was Jesus' divine glory. Jesus divine nature was unveiled for Peter, James, and John to see. It was the light of the glory of God, which led Israel in the wilderness, came upon Moses on the mountain, filled the Tabernacle, and the Temple. It was not a reflection of God's glory, as it was in the case of Moses when he was on the mountain. Jesus' brightness radiated from Jesus. Jesus was the source. It was His divine glory.

Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (verse 3)

This is just amazing to me. I don't know how Moses and Elijah got there or where exactly they came from. But they were talking with Jesus, and as alive on that mountain as Peter, James, and John. Why Moses and Elijah and not Abraham or David? I think Moses and Elijah make sense because Moses was the great lawgiver, and Elijah was the first of the great prophets.

The New Testament writers made it clear that Jesus was the fulfillment of the words of Moses and the words of the prophets. In fact, Jesus said back in chapter 5 verses 7, "*I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, I came to fulfill them.*" So Peter, James, and John watched Moses and Elijah have a conversation with Jesus, the light of the world.

And in this amazing holy place, a place that any one of us would trade about anything to experience, look who else is talking. It's Peter. He is scrambling to say something to impress Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (verse 4)

Luke says in his account, "Peter didn't know what he was saying." Matthew is more kind to Peter, but it's obvious he was way out of his league. At first look, Peter's suggestion of building shelters sounds like hospitality. What is wrong with that? This is a good place. I'll build three shelters so the three of you can stay up on this mountain top longer.

But Jesus wasn't to be called to stay on the holy mountain, he was to go down to the cross. Peter needed to remember first death, and then resurrection; first the cross and then the crown. Peter couldn't look at what he thought was the best path for Jesus; he must only look to Jesus and accept the path he took.

Be encouraged, our hope for our own personal transformation and for the church to transform society is in dialing in to Jesus and Only Jesus. Everything in God's story points to Him.

Another thing about this scene is that by building three shelters one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, Peter may have been implying equality of the three. Even after saying to Jesus back in chapter 16, "*you are the Christ,*" was Peter so impressed to see Elijah and Moses that he put the three on the same level? Our own personal transformation and our church transforming our culture will not happen if we elevate any prophet or good teacher to the same level as Jesus. I'm not sure what else Peter was thinking but the text says that Peter just kept talking.

I'm personally so thankful that God uses not-so-bright people to bring his light to the world. He chooses to use anyone of us here, and works through our weaknesses. That's called grace.

While he (Peter) was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud (Literally interrupted Peter and) said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (verse 5)

The Heavenly Father shows up and corrects Peter. "Be Quiet for once in your life Peter. Listen to me. Right here, right in front of you is JESUS, God himself in all His glory. When you see Jesus you see me. When you listen to Jesus, you listen to me." God the Father sets the record straight.

When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. (verse 6)

Why did the Father's words terrify them? Weren't they uplifting and encouraging words? Maybe it's because for the first time they really heard. They finally listened to the authority behind the Words of God. Maybe Peter had an incomplete view of Jesus and for the first time he was seeing Jesus for who he really was. The Father had intervened to show Peter that Jesus was highly exalted above Moses and Elijah.

There are a lot of voices that compete in our heads. Voices from culture that attempt to redefine Jesus as simply a moral teacher, a great prophet, a good ethical role model, or maybe just a loving man who was treated unjustly. Every one of these redefinitions sounds sweet and attractive in our culture but they diminish the words of the Father. And every one of these redefinitions deny Jesus the rightful place of honor, and the rightful place of focus he deserves our lives.

People like the idea of Jesus. People are drawn to his ethical teachings. They are drawn to how he lived his life. But the Father is saying to these disciples, "When my son speaks, don't pick and choose what you want to hear. Listen to everything he says." Peter had to learn a hard lesson on that mountain, and we must learn it here today. We cannot pick and choose what we want to hear when Jesus speaks. On that mountain, the disciples realized they could no longer afford to do that, and that realization compelled them to fall on their faces.

They became aware of their sins, their inadequacies, their pride, and their unworthiness. However, Jesus surprises them with a tender touch and healing words.

But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (verses 7–8)

And as tenderly as he was to the disciples, he treats us just as tenderly. We just need to open the scripture and listen to him. At the point of our deepest shame, at the point of our greatest failures, our greatest levels of spiritual dullness, we just need to listen. Maybe for some of us, for the first time, we need to listen to the whole counsel of Jesus, and we will be transformed.

Our own personal transformation and the church's effectiveness to transform our culture will not happen unless we do what the Father says, listen to Jesus and only Jesus.

Years later Peter writes this about his experience: "*For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.*" (2 Peter 1:16–18)

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have

seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (verse 9)

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Peter, James, and John, don't say anything about what just happened to you. Don't tell the story until the story is done. The story isn't done at the transfiguration; it's done at the resurrection. And after the transfiguration and before the resurrection is the cross and death."

The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" (verse 10)

While the disciples followed Jesus down the mountain they wanted to know about Elijah. The teachers said Elijah would come before the coming of the Lord. If that's true, where is he? Why did he leave the mountain with Moses?

Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. (verses 11–12a)

Jesus explains that the Elijah figure has already come in the person of John the Baptist. Elijah had already come in the message of repentance John the Baptist preached. And those who didn't receive his message of repentance had him killed. But those who heard John's message and took it to heart were ready to receive Jesus as their Messiah.

In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (verses 12b–13)

As glorious as the mountaintop was, Jesus tells them to get up and follow him down the mountain and into the valley. Jesus told them, "You will see even more of my glory down in the valley when you witness my suffering and death to pay your penalty for your sins. Then I will set you free so you might live forever. So now that you know who I am and what I came to do, follow me down into that valley and you will see my glory."

The Apostle Paul helps us understand how his glory is not only displayed on the mountain but also displayed in the valley.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19–20)

Paul is saying, hold the mountaintop and valley tensions together. Both display his glory. We have our exalted Jesus with his garments glistening on a high mountain, and we have our suffering Jesus stripped naked in a valley. We have our exalted Jesus flanked by two religious giants on the mountain, and our suffering Jesus flanked by two common convicted criminals in the valley. We have our exalted Jesus on a mountaintop lit up by

His glory, and we have our suffering Jesus dying alone as darkness covers the valley.

Appearances can be deceiving. And things are not always as they seem. The glory of God was revealed in Jesus' suffering as much as his glory was revealed in his transfiguration.

The transfiguration teaches us everything Jesus says is important, so maybe we are hearing as clearly as we have ever heard him. We have heard what Jesus said to Peter before they climbed that mountain. *"If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* (Matthew 16:25)

We now know that he calls us to his path. We can't say we are followers of Jesus and then to out and strike our own path. It isn't the path up a mountain the glory of God is displayed in our lives. It's the path down the mountain and through the valley where God's glory will be displayed in our lives. God's glory will be displayed in its brightest form through us, when we are linked to Jesus life, his suffering and sacrifice.

If we want to experience real transformation it will not happen unless we look to Jesus, listen to Jesus, and then follow Jesus down into the valley.

We live and work in a valley. From a distance it looks like a beautiful valley. It's full of beautiful homes and office buildings, manicured lawns and redwoods, and great Mexican restaurants and fun things to do.

But when we look closer at our beautiful valley, we see it is broken. We see in the middle of all this beauty, there is brokenness. We see it in people we know and love and in our colleagues at work. We see it in our neighbors. We can't be about God's work or display his glory if we only stay above the valley and never engage the brokenness in the valley. We must come down the mountain and display his glory in the valley.

- Kingdom work is not on the mountaintop – It's in the valley
- Kingdom work is not camping out on the mountaintop – Kingdom work happens when we camp in the valley.
- Kingdom work is not confined within the four walls of the church – It's in our neighborhoods in the valley.
- Kingdom work in the valley is where we see the glory of God today.

But we don't want to be in the valley. We want the mountaintop. God calls us to park in the valley. God doesn't call us to park on the mountaintop.

We are just like Peter when we find a beautiful place and we want to stay there. But the Father interrupted him and said, "Peter, listen to my son. You can't park here. My glory is revealed in ministering to the broken in the valley."

It's good for us to worship together on Sundays, but we can't have a benediction and a dismissal and then leave but do nothing to engage the brokenness around us only to return again next week. We can't park at Sunday services.

Let's encourage one another to look to Jesus, listen to Jesus and then follow Jesus into the valley.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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