

Date: February 23, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

Title: READING THE LAST CHAPTER FIRST

How many of you read a book from beginning to end? How many of you peek at the ending first to see if you'll like the story?

Would you believe a couple of psychologists from UC San Diego did a study on this subject, and they found that those who read the end of a story first, actually enjoyed the story more than those who read the story from beginning to end?

One of the psychologists who led the study, Jonathan Leavitt, said once people know the ending to the story, it becomes easier to process the information and gain a deeper understanding of the action in the story. On the other hand, knowing the ending to a story can be frustrating to some people. That's the purpose of spoiler alerts.

This morning is a very special Sunday in the life of the Christian church. It's Transfiguration Sunday, a day when God gives three of Jesus' disciples, (Peter, James and John) a peek at the end of the story. In this mountaintop moment, these disciples get a glimpse of Jesus' true identity and his true mission.

Six days before this story took place, Jesus confronted his disciples about their lack of faith. And then he asked them two pivotal questions: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (the Son of Man is a title Jesus used to identify himself). Then he asked them, "And who do you say that I am?"

To the question, who do people say that the Son of Man is, the disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus is somebody important, somebody with a mission from God, but the respondents are kind of vague on the details.

But on the second question, who do you say that I am?, everybody got strangely quiet. I wonder if they made eye contact with Jesus? If they had cell phones back then, all the disciples would probably be looking down at their cell phones, pretending that they had just gotten a really important text. All but Simon Peter. He was the only one to speak up: He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And at this moment, Jesus blesses him by changing his name. The name Simon literally means "to hear" or "he has heard," and the name Peter means "rock." In this moment, Simon Peter heard the truth from God, that Jesus is the Messiah. Because of this, Jesus blessed him and changed his name to Peter, Rock, because the truth of his confession would become the rock on which God is building the worldwide church. Sounds like a great story, until we encounter a plot twist.

Immediately after revealing to his disciples that he was the Messiah sent from God, Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem to contend with the religious leaders, be killed and rise again after three days. This completely caught the disciples off guard. Peter tried to argue with Jesus, and Jesus quickly shut him down. How could that be part of the plan? Wasn't the Messiah supposed to lead a revolt against Rome and restore political power to the nation of Israel? How did Jesus' death fit into that story line?

It's then that our Bible passage for today begins: After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There, Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then, there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with 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."

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

When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. He said, "Get up, Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. 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."

There it is. Peter, James and John got a peek at the end of the story. In this man, in this moment, on this mountain, God's ultimate plan for humanity is revealed for just a brief moment. The whole of human history is pointing in a certain direction. In the Transfiguration, we see what that direction is.

First, in this Transfiguration moment, the disciples see who Christ really is. On that mountaintop, the disciples begin to understand that Jesus isn't simply a man who has been touched by the glory of God. He's God in human flesh, and he's been hiding his glory from human eyes until now.

John would later write of this moment: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Up until then, Peter, James and John may have struggled with the idea that Jesus was a great holy man, a great teacher, a mystic, a prophet. But, in his transfiguration, Jesus erased all those ideas. He isn't just sent from God; He is God come to earth to redeem His people.

In this transfiguration moment, Peter, James and John get a peek at Jesus' true identity. Jesus is God revealed in human flesh. This is crucial. That means that anything he imparts is absolute truth. Any plan he sets forth is unquestionable, unshakeable, set in stone. Any action he performs or word he speaks is absolutely holy and meant to express the heart and mind of God.

Pastor A.W. Tozer once wrote, "Jesus does not offer an opinion, for He never uttered opinions. He never guessed; He knew, and He knows. His words are not as Solomon's were, the sum of sound wisdom or the results of keen observation. He spoke out of the fullness of the Godhead, and His words are very Truth itself."

Why is that important in this moment? Because Jesus had just warned his disciples that he was going to face a brutal, shameful and public death, and that as his followers, they would suffer too. So the disciples needed to see that these heartbreaking events were all part of God's perfect plan for restoring humanity back to Him. In this moment the disciples see who Jesus really is.

In this transfiguration moment, they also see the mission of Christ fulfilled. Why did Moses and Elijah appear on this mountain at this moment? Matthew doesn't tell us, but in Luke 9 where Luke records this moment, he tells us that Jesus, Moses and Elijah talked about Jesus' upcoming death. That doesn't sound like casual chit-chat. Why would Moses and Elijah be talking to Jesus about his death? Because Jesus' death and his resurrection would complete the ministries of Moses and Elijah begun more than 1,500 years before.

Through Moses, God gave the law that would define God's relationship with the nation of Israel. And yet, the law was also a symbol of our failure to live up to God's holiness. Elijah represented the greatest prophet to the nation of Israel. And yet the prophets failed too. Now God Himself, has come in the form of Jesus to fulfill the mission of the law and the prophets: to call people back to a true relationship with God.

No matter how much we try, we humans always fall short of the law and the prophets. In fact, they serve as reminders of our failure to match God's holiness. The law could not save us. The prophets could not save us. God saw our fallen state, and He sent Jesus to lift us up out of the dirt. By his own sacrifice, Jesus is carrying us to home.

Notice in verses 5-8, Peter wants to build three booths on the mountain, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, so they could stay there a while longer, but while he's still making this suggestion, God interrupts him. You've got to notice that! God interrupts him! When God interrupts you, it's time to stop talking. This passage says, "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'"

Remember, these are the exact words that God spoke at the moment of Jesus' baptism with one major variation, God ended this affirmation with a command, "Listen to Him!" Not to Moses. Not to Elijah. Not to any other great prophet or mystic or holy man. Listen to Jesus. He's the very voice of God.

And then we read, "When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. He said, 'Get up, Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus."

That's significant. When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. Moses and Elijah's ministries were complete. They could go on home to be with God. The only one left on that mountain was Jesus. The only one to look to is Jesus. The only one to listen to is Jesus. Any competing beliefs or philosophies simply disappear in the truth of who Jesus is and what his mission accomplished.

In this man Jesus, at this moment, on this mountain, the disciples saw the One True God. No one else could imitate his glory. No one else could speak God's perfect truth. No one else had the power to restore humanity back to God.

Knowing the truth about Christ means making a decision. The apostle Paul wrote in Second Corinthians 1: 20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through Jesus the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God." This is a glimpse of God's promises fulfilled. This is a peek at God's ultimate "Yes" over Creation. What about you? When you see the "Yes" of God, can you respond "Amen?" Can you say, "Yes, Jesus is the One True God, and I give my life to him?" Your identity, your mission and your destiny are in your answer to that question. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.