

February 19, 2023  
Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Listen to Him!”**

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

At the entrance of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (now a campus of United Lutheran Seminary) stands a statue of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, remembered as the “Patriarch of American Lutheranism.” Muhlenberg was a German pastor who arrived in Philadelphia in 1742 to serve as a missionary among German Lutherans who were having problems with “pretenders,” persons who presented themselves as pastors but who had no legitimate training or ordination and were often corrupt and incompetent. These “pretenders” were persons who “*run before they are sent and pretend they are ministers of the Gospel that never had a legal call or ordination.*” These pretenders would often present themselves to congregations in need of a pastor, claiming that they were trained in Europe but that their ordination papers got lost on the voyage to North America. The lack of qualified pastors became so great that congregations were forced to “*take their refuge to such men who, like roaming knights, traverse the land and, after they were no longer able to make their living because of their evil conduct in their other professions, became preachers.*” Recognizing the threat these false preachers were posing to the ministry of the church, Muhlenberg announced that people should stop making contributions to the pastor when they received the Lord’s Supper or had their children baptized:

- “Since those vagabonds are concerned only to get a few shillings for a baptism and the offerings at the Lord’s Supper and thus produce much strife, thereby giving the sects good cause to slander, I have abolished the abominable custom, considering that there is no need to pay the pastor his salary just at the occasion of the services.”

In 1748, Muhlenberg founded the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, the first permanent Lutheran synod in America. He helped prepare a uniform liturgy and wrote the basic tenets of an ecclesiastical constitution, ensuring good church order and training qualified pastors so that Muhlenberg’s motto of *ecclesia plantanda* might be fulfilled: “*the church must be planted.*”

The issue of whether or not a person presenting themselves in a certain role is legitimate or a fraud exists not only in the church but in many areas of life. We need to know that the doctor we visit has been properly trained and certified to practice medicine, that our lawyer or accountant is qualified and respectable, and that the mechanic to whom we take our car really knows how to fix an automobile. We have all had experiences with illegitimate persons who pretend they are something they are not for the purpose of fraud or gaining power over others that does not belong to them. We need to know that we can trust the persons who are given positions of power and authority over others.

When Jesus asks his disciples *“who do people say that the Son of Man is?”* (Matthew 16:13), they responded with what they had been hearing among the crowds who had heard Jesus’ teachings and witnessed his miracles: *“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”* (16:14). But when Jesus asks his disciples *“who do you say that I am?”* Simon Peter speaks on behalf of the group when he responds that *“you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”* (16:15-16). This is the correct answer, and Jesus praises Peter for this confession and announces that *“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it”* (16:18). But Jesus also knows that there is a great deal of confusion about the true identity of the Messiah of God, and that many other people of his time are claiming to be the Messiah. Jesus also knows that there is still confusion among his disciples as to who the Messiah is and what he must do to accomplish God’s Will; after Jesus tells his disciples that *“he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”* (16:21), Peter takes him aside and rebukes him, since in his mind the Messiah cannot suffer such a humiliating death. While Jesus rebukes Peter as being *“a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things”* (16:23), he also knows that he needs to reveal his full identity to these disciples so that they may understand that he is truly the fulfillment of God’s promises of a Messiah who is *Emmanuel*, “God is with us.” So, six days after this encounter, *“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.”* (17:1). Mountains in the Bible are places where people come into contact with God away from the busyness of everyday life; it was on Mount Sinai that God is revealed to Moses in the burning bush, and Jesus’ great sermon in Matthew is the Sermon on the Mount. After leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses returns to Mount Sinai and is instructed by the Lord to *“come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction”* (Exodus 24:12). When Moses descends the mountain carrying the two tablets of the

covenant, “*Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he was talking with God*” (34:29). As Moses was transformed when he was on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, when he arrives on the mountain with his three disciples Jesus “*was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white*” (Matthew 17:2). “Transfigured” means “metamorphosed” (*metamorphoomai*, “to undergo a metamorphosis”). On this mountain, Jesus reveals his full identity to his disciples as the one who is “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary*” (*Small Catechism*). In the disciples’ vision, Jesus glows with a transcendent glory reserved for heavenly beings, “*an anticipatory revelation of Jesus as belonging to the divine world*” (M. Eugene Boring). The visionary transformation represents the act of God who makes the revelation to the disciples. Matthew specifically adds that Jesus’ face “*shone like the sun,*” so that “*all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*” (2 Corinthians 3:18). While there are similarities between the appearance of Moses and Jesus, the key difference is that Moses’ appearance reflected the glory of God, while Jesus shines with his own glory as the transfigured Holy One of God: “*Jesus is no mere human mediator like Moses; he is the Son of God, who appears not with a reflected glory but a glory that is his own.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). No sooner has Jesus been transfigured before his disciples than “*suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him*” (17:3). Both Moses and Elijah were well-known miracle workers who like Jesus fasted for forty days (“*[Elijah] got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that good for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.*” – 1 Kings 19:8). Both were rejected by some of God’s people, and both encountered God’s glory on Sinai (Horeb). Both were associated with Jewish eschatological hopes, which included the return of Elijah and the coming of a “prophet like Moses”:

- “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” – Malachi 4:5-6.
- “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” – Deuteronomy 18:15.

The presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration “*signifies that the entire Old Testament bears witness to his messianic mission that will culminate on the cross.*” (Mitch and Sri). By portraying Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as taking together in a scene of transcendent glory is confirmation that Jesus is in continuity with and

the fulfillment of God's work as represented by the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah were both prophets who were initially rejected by the people but vindicated by God, both were advocates of the covenant and Torah, and both worked miracles. Up to this point, the disciples have been silent in the face of such a spectacular spectacle that they are witnessing. Peter finally speaks, saying to Jesus "*Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*" (17:4). 'Peter's proposal to build three "dwellings" (*skene*) connotes the tabernacle and Temple where the *skeninah*, the fiery cloud that symbolized the continuing presence of God among the people, dwelt over the ark of the covenant:

- "And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD." – 1 Kings 8:10-11.

Before Jesus can respond to Peter's offer, "*suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'*" (17:5). The heavenly cloud of God's presence appears, as on the tabernacle of Moses' day and in the Temple. The heavenly voice comes from the cloud, and the God who had previously spoken on Mount Sinai only to Moses speaks directly to Jesus' disciples. The heavenly voice speaks in exactly the same words as at the baptism of Jesus, where "*a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*" (3:17). The voice confirms the identity and mission of Jesus first declared at the baptism and confirms Peter's confession that Jesus is indeed "*the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*" At the Transfiguration, however, the heavenly voice adds a command: "*listen to him!*" As in the *shema*, where the people of Israel are commanded to "*hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone*" (Deuteronomy 6:4), "hear" or "listen" carries with it the Old Testament connotation of "obey" and is the same command given with regard to the "prophet like Moses" whom God would send with the command that "*you shall heed such a prophet*" (Deuteronomy 18:15). The command to listen to Jesus continues the emphasis in Matthew on Jesus' authoritative teaching as the one with whom "*the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*" (Matthew 7:28-29).

- "For as St. Paul declares, in his person 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9), and there is not God apart from him where I could come to him or find him – although God is everywhere else, of course. Now wherever one hears this man's Word and sees his work, there one surely hears and sees God's Word and work." – Martin Luther.

When the disciples hear the heavenly voice, “*they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear*” (17:6), reminiscent of fearful responses to a *theophany*, the appearance of God in the Old Testament (“*Then I heard the sound of his words, and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.*” – Daniel 10:9). But then Jesus “*came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus alone.*” (17:7-8). The heavenly visitors depart, but Jesus remains “*to complete the work of redemption that those two Old Testament figures foreshadowed*” (Mitch and Sri). Jesus never directly responded to Peter’s offer to build three dwellings, but “*without heavenly companions, without heavenly glory, Jesus is the ‘tabernacle,’ the reality of God’s abiding presence with us ... the disciples descend from the mountain into the mundane world of suffering and mission, accompanied by Jesus, ‘God with us.’*” (Boring). As they come down the mountain, Jesus orders his disciples to “*tell no one about the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead*” (17:9); the fullness of Jesus’ glory will not be revealed until after he fulfills his mission in his death and resurrection. Jesus’ mention of “*vision*” relates the event to the visionary apocalyptic tradition in the Old Testament:

- “But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. He said to me, ‘Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.’ So while he was speaking the word to me, I stood up trembling. He said to me, ‘Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.’” – Daniel 10:10-12.

The vision the disciples witnessed at the Transfiguration is related to the Easter experience and indicates that it can only be understood from the post-Easter perspective of Matthew’s readers, who are called to identify themselves with the disciple in the story.

- “Matthew shapes the narrative of the first gospel to encourage them to remain faithful even in the midst of the fractiousness of their moment in history. God reveals Jesus to the three disciples and to the readers of the gospel in the body that Jesus will have when God resurrects him. At the transfiguration, God gives the Matthean church a vision of the future: Jesus as he will be on the day God resurrects him and as he will be when he returns to complete the work of replacing the old world with the new.” – Ronald J. Allen.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord reveals to Jesus' disciples and to all of Jesus' followers that the one we follow is no mere human teaching, and that his proclamation are not the words or opinions of an ordinary individual; his words are the "words of eternal life" because they are spoken by the one who is the *"Word that became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth."* They are the very Word of God proclaimed by the one who is the Word of God Incarnate who suffered, died, and rose again so that we might have the assurance that these words are trustworthy and true, and that the words of Holy Scripture are not merely ancient texts with historical value but the very living Word of God that speaks a word of truth today as they first proclaimed the word of truth centuries ago. Unlike the "pretenders" who preyed on the innocent congregations of Pennsylvania, we are called to listen to the Word of God in Jesus Christ because these are the words that proclaim God's love to us and are the liberating Word of God that is *"a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."* (Psalm 119:105). The words of Jesus are the "living word from heaven," the word that assures us that *"there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12).

- "Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Jesus' power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus." – Luke Timothy Johnson.

The work of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to plant the church that is rooted in the Word of God that is incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ continues in the church that gathers to hear God's Word as a word that is trustworthy and true. It is a word whose authenticity is confirmed on the mount of Transfiguration, and we who continue the legacy of these first disciples are commanded to listen to him, because it is our Lord Jesus Christ whose word is the word of life, the word that assures us that God is with us and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. Of all the voices that might pretend to be the word of God, there is only one to whom we listen, one who we trust, one who we obey: the Word of Life that is present among us in the Word of God that became flesh, suffered, died and rose again so that we might live unto eternal life. As disciples of this Living Word from Heaven, our call is clear: **Listen to him!**

Amen