

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 17:1-9, “This is not ‘Would you rather?’”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/19/2023**

When my family is sitting around the dinner table,  
from time to time someone will start a game called,  
“Would you rather?”

The game works by pairing two extremely good or (more often)  
extremely bad options and asking someone  
which they would rather experience.

Would you rather be forced to live the same day over and over again  
for a full year, or take 3 years off the end of your life?

Would you rather be the most intelligent person in the world  
or the most talented person in the world?

Would you rather have to buy all used underwear or all used toothbrushes?

In our passage today, the disciples of Jesus *think* he is playing  
a spiritual version of “would you rather.”  
And they know right away which option they prefer!

*They learn (as we also must) that following Jesus  
is not a spiritualized version of “would you rather.”  
However, if we listen to Jesus,  
we know that the glory of the mountaintop  
remains with us in valley.*

Immediately prior to our passage, Jesus begins to explain to his disciples  
that he must suffer many things  
at the hands of the teachers of the law,  
that he must be killed and on the third day raised to life.

Peter can't handle it. He says, “**Never, Lord!**  
**This shall never happen to you.**”

Jesus famously rebukes him saying, “**Get behind me, Satan.**”

But after that, he goes on to say,

**“whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.”**

On the other hand, in our passage from Matthew 17,  
Jesus, Peter, James, and John (the inner circle of the disciples)  
go up on a mountain by themselves.

In verse two, rather unceremoniously,  
Matthew tells us that he was transfigured before them.  
“Transfigured” is an unusual term that means his figure was transformed.

What happened in that moment is a genuine mystery,  
but commentator Dale Bruner suggests that  
“what Jesus was *within* was once made visible without.”

Most of the time, the light of Jesus was within him.  
He didn’t glow when he slept at night.  
His eyeballs didn’t work like flashlights.  
He had an inner light that was powerful and abiding, but unseen externally.

In the transfiguration “what Jesus was *within* was made visible without.”  
To just these three disciples,  
the true glory of Jesus shines out on that mountain top.

When Jesus is brilliantly changed before their eyes,  
Matthew informs us in verse 3 that *Moses and Elijah*  
appear before the disciples speaking with Jesus.

This is where things are just getting weird, right?

Predictably, Peter takes center stage in verse 4.  
He’s never hung out with Moses and Elijah,  
and this brightly lit Jesus is refreshing compared  
to the one talking about crucifixion down below.

Peter *thinks* Jesus is saying,  
    “Would you rather be my disciple down in the valley  
        and walk with me to the cross,  
            or stay here on the mountaintop where I shine in glory  
                with ancient heroes of our faith?”

That’s an easy choice: stay on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah!

So he says, “Hey, don’t move!  
    In just a minute we’ll make some shelters for each of you to sleep in!”

We also do this with God. We have our preferred version of life,  
    and sometimes we get a glimpse of it where everything goes  
        as expected and we grow and thrive  
            and our family isn’t full of crazy people...  
And we say, “God, let’s keep it like this *all the time.*”

But Jesus is *not* playing “would you rather.”  
    And God is not interested in Peter’s selection of the mountaintop  
        as his preferred residence.  
        We know this because in verse 5,  
            *God* actually interrupts Peter’s blathering  
                on about building shelters.

I’ve got a list of most embarrassing moments  
    that is pretty impressive, but none of them  
        compare to being cut off mid-sentence  
            by the voice of God.

Verse 5 reads, **“While Peter was *still* talking,  
    a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said,  
        “This is my Son, whom I love;  
            and with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.”**

Peter was seeing the light of Jesus, but not letting it into his heart.  
    He was trying to keep it up on the mountain for himself  
        and his friends instead of taking it back down  
            to the world below.

In all four gospels, there are only two places  
where God speaks directly from heaven and people hear him audibly:  
The first is at Jesus' baptism, and the second  
is here at the transfiguration.

Both times, God says *exactly* the same thing,  
"This is my Son, whom I love; and with him I am well pleased."

But this time, the heavenly voice adds, "Listen to him."

Moses was God's chosen leader who received the Law on Mt. Sinai.

Elijah was considered the greatest of the Old Testament prophets,  
the defender of God's reputation in the face of false religions.  
These two figures represent the highest authorities  
in the Jewish faith—the Law and the prophets.

But even in the presence of these incredible figures  
representing the foundations of Jewish faith,  
God says, "This is my Son ... listen to *him*."  
Is Jesus the newest among these authorities?  
No. He's the only authority.

Verse 6 tells us that in the midst of the cloud and the voice from heaven,  
the fear of the disciples becomes too much,  
and they fall facedown on the ground. They are terrified.  
But Jesus came and touched them.

What a beautiful image. When we are terrified,  
when we are frozen in the face of the world's chaos  
and don't know what to do next,  
when we're clinging to the comforts  
we surround ourselves with, Jesus comes,  
and he *touches* us.

The light of Jesus does not shine on our weakness with disappointment.  
Jesus came and touched them.  
And the words the disciples hear are not words  
that shame them for being afraid,  
God is not shaking his head at them.

The first words of the one they are to listen to are, "Get up. Don't be afraid."

It's the touch of Jesus that enables us  
to move beyond our fear and into obedience.

After Jesus speaks these words to the disciples, they look up,  
and "they saw no one except Jesus."

We would all rather stay in our mountaintop spiritual experience  
than come back to the world where we get tired,  
and our frail bodies wear out,  
and there are wars and conflicts and difficulties.

But that's escapism. Jesus doesn't call us to escape.

Our faith isn't one of easy answers  
or expecting for one miracle after another to give us  
the life of our wildest dreams.

We are called to take up our cross and follow.

In preparing the disciples for the hardship of following Christ,

God pointed them to only one source:

Jesus the light of the world.

What does this mean for us?

We who follow Jesus will walk in the valley of life here on earth.

God isn't going to miraculously give us a life on the mountaintop.

*But if we listen to Jesus,*

*we know that the glory of the mountaintop  
remains with us in valley.*

Jesus' transfiguration means that the light of the world  
accompanies us in the darkness.

The brilliant light of Christ,  
pure, gracious, and holy,  
goes with us even on the darkest night.

We don't get a perfect world. We don't get to live

with Jesus and Moses and Elijah on a mountain top.

But we can walk through life with the light of Christ inside us.

We can let the light of Christ into the core of our being  
so that whatever people think of us from the outside,  
we will shine God's love and grace into the world around.

Let's close with these words and prayer by William Loader,  
a poet and pastor from Perth, Australia.

**Prayer**

O God, We open our eyes and we see Jesus,  
the months of ministry transfigured to a beam of light,  
the light of the world, your light.  
May your light shine upon us.

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah,  
your word restoring us, showing us the way,  
telling a story, your story, his story, our story.  
May your word speak to us.

We open our eyes and we see mist,  
the cloud of your presence  
which assures us of all we do not know  
and that we do not need to fear that.  
Teach us to trust.

We open our eyes and we see Peter's constructions,  
his best plans, our best plans, our missing the point,  
our missing the way. Forgive our foolishness and sin.

We open our eyes and we see Jesus,  
not casting us off, but leading us down, leading us out -  
to ministry, to people. Your love endures forever.

We open our ears and we hear your voice, 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him!'  
And we give you thanks. Amen.