

**Last Sunday in Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
19 February 2023**

Matthew 17:1-9

One of my favorite songs by “The Who,” is called “Who are you?” The catchy tune of this song asks the same question repeatedly, “Who are you? Who, who, who, who? Who are you?” This tune has been in my mind this week as I have prayed over this passage. I was surprised the other day when I discovered the actual verses to the song. They talk about human despair, about the consequences of choices made, about finding yourself stuck and terribly unhappy. One of the verses says, “I stretched back and I hiccupped. And looked back on my busy day. Eleven hours in the Tin Pan. God, there's got to be another way.” Then after the chorus asks us again a hundred times, “Who are you?” the song ends with the following two verses: “I know there's a place you walked, where love falls from the trees. My heart is like a broken cup. I only feel right on my knees. I spit out like a sewer hole. Yet still receive your kiss. How can I measure up to anyone now. After such a love as this?”

This song is appropriate for us today as we review the passage from Matthew. Let me first tell you about the context. After spending a few weeks on the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7:27), the lectionary has jumped about 10 chapters of Matthew and now we find ourselves on Matthew 17: 1-9. The reason for this is simple: This season of ordinary time always ends with the Transfiguration scene, an episode presented by Matthew, Mark and Luke. You may remember that the season began with the Baptism of Jesus by John. As he is baptized, God's voice reveals to those gathered the true identity of the young man being baptized, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Today we hear the same words at the Mount of Transfiguration. In Matthew, the scene happens six days after Jesus asks the disciples his famous question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” to which Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” From here Jesus proceeds to announce his death, “...that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain. There he is transformed before them. Moses and Elijah appear and talk to Jesus, and this connects the events taking place here with the Old Testament. You may recall the episode when Elijah was surrounded by the glory of God up on a mountain top (1 Kings 19:11ff). You also remember Moses in mount Sinai, surrounded by the Glory of God, as we read in the passage from Exodus 24 today. Both Elijah and Moses are here now, in the physical presence of Christ, surrounded by the eternal glory of God. Their presence is proof that everything in the Old Testament points to Jesus of Nazareth and is fulfilled by him. All three evangelists tell us that Peter is quite moved by the scene and volunteers to build a tent for each of them. Right after this passage, Jesus begins his walk towards Jerusalem, where he is ultimately crucified. It appears clear to me that the passage from Matthew

today is making the following point: identity and mission are inseparably connected. This was the case for Jesus and it is the case for us.

You need to know who you are before you know where you are going. We see in the bookends of Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration the answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" In both of these events the answer is given to us by God himself who says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" We see the answer to the same question in the event that preceded the Transfiguration in Matthew's Gospel. This time the answer is given to us by Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In both of these cases we see the identity of Jesus clearly established as the "Son of God." Once identity has been clearly established, the mission becomes clear. I have thought a great deal about what happened after these two bookends we discussed above.

You may remember that after Jesus' baptism he went to the desert, where he finds himself on a mountain being tempted by Satan to renounce his humanity. Paraphrasing the temptations, Satan tells Jesus, "Escape your humanity by providing for your needs supernaturally, 'tell these stones to become bread;' escape your humanity by appealing to Divine favor on your behalf without the necessity of suffering, 'If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you...' and, lastly, escape your humanity by acquiring worldly power and reputation, without the necessity of fulfilling your mission on the cross, 'All this I will give you... if you will bow down and worship me' (Matthew 4.)" Jesus responds to each of these statements by affirming his identity as the Son of God. He is the Emmanuel, the God with us. Jesus knows who he is. He knows where he came from and why he is here. From this clear sense of identity, he comes to understand fully what the purpose of his life is. He is now ready to begin his rescue mission for the sake of humanity!

On the mount of Transfiguration Jesus comes face to face with his identity as the Son of God once again. And, once again the temptation to remain in that divine, glorified state is presented to him, this time by Peter, who ironically was called "Satan" by Jesus a few verses before. Peter says, "Lord, it is good for us to be here..." Once again we see the temptation to abandon his humanity and to hold on tightly to his divinity. Peter knows that things are hard down in the valley; there is too much pain and suffering. Death awaits on the valley. It is the place of betrayal and anguish; the place of doubt and despair; the place of greed and out-of-control ambition; the valley is the place of lostness. If only they could stay here! Now, lest we become unfairly hard on Peter, let me remind you that many of us have escape fantasies deep within our souls. There are times when most of us would like to be seating down on a beach somewhere, the sun is out, not a cloud in the skies, there is a gentle breeze from the east, and a nice-looking waiter or waitress is filling up our glass every few minutes with something delicious and fruity and... alcoholic. We all would like to be perpetually on vacation in some paradise island, far away from the hustle of the day. There is pain in the valley below. There is that note pasted to the refrigerator reminding us of the next chemo appointment. There are conflicts with

neighbors and families. There are piles of bills that need to be paid. There is resentment at children who don't call and friends who don't visit. Things are tough in the valley!

I love the fact that God interrupts Peter, "while he was still speaking..." God reminds Jesus who he is. He is the Son of God for humanity, and Jesus once again understands that his mission is down here on earth. He must face Jerusalem! He must start a new walk to another mountain, where his agony and passion await. On the first mountain he is tempted to avoid going to the mountain of sacrifice, but today we see Jesus beginning to walk to that other mountain, to his cross, to the place of sacrifice, to the place of agony and torture. Today, Christ begins the walk and he knows where he is going. He knows that his identity as the Son of God will lead him to the fulfillment of his mission as God for us, as our Savior, as our Redeemer!

Who are we and where are we going? My friends, I am very glad that Jesus chose such imperfect people to take to the mountain of Transfiguration. I know for a fact that I am just like Peter. I too want to escape! I too am overcome with sleep and overwhelmed by my own needs. I too become scandalized by the cross of Christ and want to scream, "Never, Lord!.. This shall never happen to you!" I too want prosperity and glory and Transfiguration without the necessity of sacrifice. I too want to build a tent on the mountain top and escape the anxiety, the depression, the isolation, and the desperation of this world. But my friends, we are followers of the Crucified Messiah. This is our identity! This is the answer to the question "Who are you?" We are Christians. We follow one who came down from the mountain of Transfiguration and willingly walked up the mountain of sacrifice. We follow one who did not allow the temptation of escapism to distract him from his mission. We follow one who died our death that we may live! We follow one who shed his blood so that our sins may be washed away. This is who we are. This is our identity!

The answer to the question, "Where are you going?" can be asked another way, "What is the purpose of your life? What do you perceive to be the mission God has given you to accomplish? This question has to be answered by each one of us, with the discerning help of our brothers and sisters. I cannot give you the answer. Only Christ himself can give you this answer, for the yoke you will take on and the cross you will carry are uniquely yours. For some of you the cross may be the care of an elderly parent or disabled child, for others it may be raising your children alone, for some it may be coping with severe illness with grace and hope, etc. What I do know, my brothers and sisters, is that the cross we carry we never carry alone. He who died for us on his own cross will be there with us. And with him on our side all is possible!

May he continue to bless us. Amen!