

“Six Days Later”

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

Drive-In theatres were very popular in my childhood, a place where families could bring their children in their pajamas and teenagers could gather to see the latest B-movies and catch up on the latest high school gossip. Unlike more traditional movie theatres, the Drive-In theatres in our area would admit patrons at any time, often in the middle of one of the movies that were being shown that evening. While it was good to be able to come to the theatre at any time, it was also frustrating to arrive in the middle of a movie, not knowing what was happening and confused by plot developments that had been explained earlier in the film. Without knowing what had happened in the past, a movie was little more than confusing images on a very big screen.

At the beginning of today’s Gospel lesson, we may feel as if we have arrived in the middle of story without knowing what had happened in the past. Matthew begins the seventeenth chapter of his Gospel by telling his readers that *“six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.”* (17:1). Our question may well be *“six days later than what?”* What happened six days earlier that was so important that Matthew feels the need to begin this story with this time reference? What have we missed by coming into the story in the middle, and will what happens next make any sense?

Matthew’s time reference takes us back to the previous chapter in his Gospel, when Jesus asks his disciples after arriving in the district of Caesarea Philippi *“who do people say that the Son of Man is?”* (16:13). Jesus is aware that as his fame grows so has speculation as to his identity; and by the disciples’ response he knows that most of it has been wrong: *“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”* (16:14). But Jesus’ question was not merely for the purpose of finding out what the disciples had heard what people were saying about him; his real purpose is heard in his next question: *“But who do you say that I am?”* (16:15). Jesus is interested in finding out what his closest followers think about him, how they would identify him to themselves and to others. Their answer comes immediately through their spokesperson Peter, who declares *“you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* (16:16). That is, of course, the correct answer; the Church continues to confess that *“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord”* (Apostles Creed), and Jesus at first praises Peter for this confession of faith and declares 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 it soon becomes clear that while Peter gave the correct answer, he doesn’t understand *why* it is the correct answer. When Jesus informs 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 Jesus aside and rebukes him, since his understanding of the identity of the Messiah of God does not include suffering and crucifixion. But Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, harshly ordering his disciples to *“get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (16:23). He then gathers all the disciples and warns them that following Jesus the Messiah will not lead to the glory they might have imagined but to the Cross on which the true Messiah will fulfill God’s Will:

- “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” – 16:24-26.

It is “*six days later*,” after it is clear that the disciples do not understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah nor what it means to be his followers, that Jesus takes three of his disciples – Peter, James, and John – “*and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.*” Mountains in the Bible are often “liminal places” where people come into God’s presence, the best example being Moses’ encounters with God on Mt. Sinai; and it is on this mountain that Jesus reveals his full identity when “*he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*” (17:2). Jesus reveals his divine nature to his disciples, that he is the fulfillment of the angel’s proclamation to Joseph that “*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’*” (1:23). He reveals the fullness of his glory as “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14). Jesus glows with a transcendent glory reserved for heavenly beings, “*an anticipatory revelation of Jesus as belonging to the divine world*” (M. Eugene Boring). In Jewish tradition, this radiance was attributed to Adam, Abraham, and many others. Jesus’ transfiguration (from the same word as “metamorphosis”) represents the act of God who makes the revelation to the disciples so that there might be no confusion as to Jesus’ full identity 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*).

- “Likewise, it is taught that God the Son became a human being, born of the pure Virgin Mary, and that the two natures, the divine and the human, are so inseparable united in one person that there is one Christ. He is true God and true human being who truly ‘was born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried’ in order both to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to conciliate God’s wrath.” – Augsburg Confession, Article III.

The transfiguration of Jesus is accompanied by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, two persons from the Hebrew Scriptures who played an outsized role in the eschatological expectations among many Jews in the first century. The very last verses of the Torah praise Moses as an unparalleled prophet, a liberator of his own people through the Lord:

- “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.” – Deuteronomy 34:10-12.

Elijah was also remembered by the people of Israel as a mighty prophet of the Lord, the one who defeated the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18 and who was taken up into heaven in a dramatic fashion: “*a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated [Elijah and Elisha], and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.*” (2 Kings 2:11). This scene fed a prophetic hope of Elijah’s return since he did not die in a typical way; the last words of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, speak of the return of Elijah on the “day of the LORD”:

- “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD. 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.

By portraying Moses, Elijah, and Jesus talking together, Matthew confirms his view that Jesus is in continuity with and the fulfillment of God’s work as represented in the Old Testament; *“the Transfiguration emerges from a stream of tradition expecting the return of the great prophets Moses and Elijah as harbingers of a divine revolution. Their presence marks Jesus as their heir, their collaborator in this holy work.”* (Eric Barreto).

Peter is the first of the three disciples to speak, but without complete insight, still placing Jesus in the category of the prophets as he had six days earlier: *“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). These “dwellings” (*skenai*, “tabernacles, huts”) are reminders of the tabernacle and Temple in the Old Testament where the *shekinah*, the fiery cloud that symbolized the continuing presence of God among the people, dwelt over the ark of the covenant (*“There I will meet you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.”* – Exodus 25:22). The tabernacles were also connected to the Festival of Booths, in which the people of Israel were commanded to *“live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations many know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”* (Leviticus 23:42-43).

Peter does not receive a direct response to his proposal; while he is still speaking, *“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 voice of God, who had previously spoken from the cloud on Mt. Sinai only to Moses (*“When the LORD descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the LORD summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.”* – Exodus 19:20) now speaks directly to the disciples. The voice speaks the same words as at Jesus’ baptism (*“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”* – 3:17), confirming the identity and mission of Jesus declared on the banks of the Jordan River as well as the confession of Peter six days earlier. But there is one added element that the voice from the cloud attaches to the words of identification from Jesus’ baptism: the command that they *“listen to him!”* As in the *shema*, in which the people of Israel are commanded to *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is your God, the LORD alone”* (Deuteronomy 6:4), the command to “listen” carries with it the connotation to “obey” and is the same command given with respect to a “prophet like Moses” whom God would send: *“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 disciples recognize that they are in the presence of the Lord and fall on their faces in fearful response to this *theophany*, the appearance of God in their midst, as God’s people had previously responded in God’s awesome presence:

- “When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.” – Exodus 34:30.
- “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.
- “O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.” – Habakkuk 3:2.

But fear is not where the disciples will remain, for “*Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’*” (17:7). When they looked up, the heavenly vision had ceased, Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and “*they saw no one except Jesus alone.*” (17:8). But even though their environment had returned to the way it was, the disciples were transformed from their circumstances six days ago; for now they fully understood what it means to confess that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God”; for “*without heavenly companions, without heavenly glory, he is the ‘tabernacle,’ the reality of God’s abiding presence.*” (Eugene Boring). The glory of the Lord does not dwell on a mountain, or in a booth, or even in the Temple; the fullness of God’s grace and glory dwells in the person of Jesus Christ himself, who promises to his disciples at the end of Matthew’s Gospel is to “*remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20). The disciples returned to a world that appeared as it has six days previously, but which had forever been changed because they knew that the one who had called them, the one who they were following, was truly “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” the fulfillment of the promises of God that the tabernacle of God was with them in the presence of “Jesus our Emmanuel,” God who is with us always.

- “God’s presence transfigures this life. Ordinary revelations are here and there and everywhere – the whole world held in God’s hands, gifts offered to us not as possessions under our control but as abundant and unpredictable grace. Transfiguration is an invitation to return to our communities and our lives with renewed attention and patience, awaiting the luminescence of the mundane. To attend to the present and wonder at the ordinary; to let this life astonish us with the sacred. It is good for us to be here – right here where we are, for this too is holy ground.” – Isaac S. Villegas.

If we are to fully understand who we are as a Church and our purpose in this time and place, we also have to go back to the origins of our story in the one who we believe is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” We are the church that is built upon the rock of Peter’s confession, the church that is “*the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments administered in accordance with the Gospel.*” (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). We are a congregation of Lutheran Christians rooted in the teachings of Martin Luther that this gathering of the baptized is an expression of our belief in “*the holy catholic church the communion of saints*”:

- “I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian church, that is, through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ.” – *Sermons of the Catechism*, 1528.

Our gathering this morning is rooted in the foundations laid by our ancestors in faith here at Zion who founded this congregation over 160 years ago and who passed this ministry on to successive generations who have sought to worship and serve our Lord in this place. Our assembly is indebted to the pastors, teachers, parents, family members, and role models who took the promises they made at our baptism seriously so that we might gather around the light and love of Christ today. The story of what brought us together today has its origins in what happened six days ago, 160 years ago, 500 years ago, and 2,000 years ago – the faith that is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the God who was the hope of our ancestors in ages past and is the good news that gives us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

- “Belief in the communion of saints is a call to immersion in the holy-making project of living out the life of Christ ourselves as so many have done before us. Strengthened by the model of the

One ‘in whose memory’ we make Eucharist – this thanksgiving for everyone that is – we are bound to all it implies: We are bound to the reflective life that can lead us to great heights. We are bound to the unfinished work of bringing the world to the beatitudes. And we are bound, as well, to those who, in a special way, have modeled it before us and shown it to be worthwhile.”
– Joan Chittister, *In Search of has*

As a movie makes sense only if it is seen from the beginning, the story of our modern Church must be understood in the context of the Gospel story that began with and is rooted in Jesus Christ, in the traditions and teachings of our Lutheran Church, in the legacy that has been passed on to us by our ancestors in faith, and in God’s call to us to faithfully pass on this faith that has been entrusted to us to successive generation so that the story of God’s love for God’s people might continue. Let us give thanks for all that God has done for us in ages past even as we live in hope for what our Lord has in store for us in years to come.

Amen.