

Matthew 17 “The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son” June 28, 2015 (Peter)
Malachi 3:16-4:6
Psalm 104

Malachi 3:17 speaks of how the LORD will spare Israel
“as a man spares his son who serves him.”

God says that he will bring judgment on the arrogant and all evildoers,
and the fire of God’s wrath will them leave neither root nor branch.
But those who fear the name of the LORD will be saved.

And then Malachi draws together the whole history of Israel in two sentences:
“Remember the law of my servant Moses,
the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”

God had delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt through his servant Moses.
And God had given Israel the Law in order to direct them in the way they should walk.
But Israel had not kept the law of Moses.
And so God sent the prophets to call Israel back to the LORD.

That’s why the next verse says,
“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet
before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.
And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children
and the hearts of children to their fathers,
lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

In the days of the Kings, Elijah had been sent to call Israel back to the LORD.
But Israel refused.
And so Elijah was given a message of utter destruction.
The house of Ahab would be destroyed –
and ultimately, the kingdom of Israel would be brought to nothing.

Malachi says that the cycles of Israel’s rebellion and repentance will finally end.
Luke 1:17 explicitly says that John the Baptist had this mission –
to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers.
But as we have seen throughout Matthew’s gospel,
John’s mission does not seem to have done much better than Elijah!
In fact, whereas Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind to heaven,
John is beheaded by Herod!

The Law of Moses and the preaching of Elijah cannot get us out of this cycle!

Psalm 104 points us in the right direction.
The Psalm opens,
“Bless the LORD, O my soul!

O LORD my God, you are very great!
You are covered with splendor and majesty,
covering yourself with light as with a garment,
stretching out the heavens like a tent.”

Israel’s hope was always in the glory of God!

Sing Psalm 104

Read Matthew 16:24-17:27

We live in a day when many look at the suffering in this world
and they wonder, “How can there be a good and loving God?”

We also live in a day that is horribly calloused to the suffering around us!
Nursing homes and hospice facilities are full of lonely, dying people.
Then again, so are apartment complexes and neighborhoods.

Our economy encourages us to fragment – to pursue our education and follow our employment
all over the country, or all over the world –
so that we are isolated and detached from our family.

We have been brainwashed into thinking that we don’t want to be a burden to others –
which, of course, really means that we don’t want anyone else to be a burden to *us*.

We don’t want to “deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.”

Over the last few weeks, I kept hearing people say,
“I’ve never seen a church take such good care of a dying man.”
And I kept thinking to myself –
“We’re not really doing a very good job.
Why are all these people surprised?
What has become “normal”?”

Instead of “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,”
the new normal is “please yourself, take up your hobbies, and follow your dreams.”

Lonely old people are a nuisance – until you become one yourself.

In the coming chapters of Matthew’s gospel
Jesus will begin to describe the new community that he is building around himself.
But first, Jesus establishes a “new normal.”

In 16:21, Jesus said that he must suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised.
In 17:22-23, Jesus says that he will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him,
and he will be raised on the third day.

In 20:18, Jesus will say that he will be crucified, and will be raised on the third day.

Three times Jesus explains that he must die and be raised again on the third day.
And as he explains this, he tells us that “if anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (16:24)

The pattern of the Kingdom is the pattern of the Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son.
Only this pattern can account for the suffering of this age.
Suffering is never the goal.
Beyond suffering, there is always the resurrection.

Why did we sit at Rolf’s side all day and all night for more than two weeks?
Why did we bring a dying man into our home?
Why did we want our children to gather round as he breathed his last?

Because Jesus died – and rose again from the dead on the third day.
And he told us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

In this life, we don’t see much of the glory.
In this life, we mostly see the suffering.
But sometimes God gives us a glimpse – a reminder – of what it is we seek!

Introduction: “The Son of Man Coming in His Kingdom” (16:24-28)

In 16:28, Jesus says that some standing here “will not taste death
until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

What does that mean?

Some have argued that this refers to the ascension of Jesus
or the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit.
Others think that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
And undoubtedly those are all important!

But the Transfiguration of Jesus is a very clear instance of “some” of the disciples
seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

1. On the Mountain: Moses, Elijah, and the Beloved Son (v1-8)

*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a
high mountain by themselves.*

After six days – in other words, this is a very precise connection with what Jesus just said.
Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

In Exodus 24

Moses had taken Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, along with 70 elders up Mt. Sinai.

In Exodus 24

the glory of the LORD was on the mountain for six days.
In Exodus 24
the LORD spoke to Moses from the glory cloud at the top of the mountain.

But here in Matthew 17,
the glory is first associated with *Jesus*:

² *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.*

When Moses saw God's back in Exodus 34,
Moses' face shone with a reflected glory that faded.
But here, Jesus' glory is *not* a reflected glory!
Moses' face shone because he had been in the presence of God.
Jesus' face shines because the glory of God is within him!

Jesus *is* God in the flesh!

³ *And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.* ⁴ *And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."*

Moses represents the Exodus and the giving of the Law.
Elijah represents the Exile and the prophetic call to repentance.

What is missing?
The Son of David!
The Christ!
Peter is the one who confessed six days ago
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Peter immediately grasps that Jesus is the *next big thing*!
Moses, Elijah, Jesus – it all makes sense! –
the great triumvirate of redemptive history!
At the feast of booths, Israel was supposed to live in booths for a week –
remembering the Exodus,
and so Peter offers to make booths/tents for each of the great triumvirate!

But as he was speaking,

⁵ *He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son,^[a] with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."*

There is no "great triumvirate"!
Heretofore you have listened to Moses and Elijah.
But *this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.*

Moses was sent to tell Israel what Israel was called to do and to be,
so that Israel might be pleasing to God.

Elijah was sent to call Israel to repentance,
so that Israel might be pleasing to God.

The scribes and the Pharisees taught that the Messiah – the Christ –
would be the one who restored Israel,
so that *Israel* might be pleasing to God.

After all, God had told Pharaoh through Moses,
“Israel is my son, my firstborn, let my son go that he may serve me.”

But the voice from the glory cloud says something different.

The voice does not say, “listen to him, and then I will be pleased with Israel, my son.”

The voice says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased;
listen to him.”

(This is the same wording that the Father had used at the baptism of Jesus).

Jesus is not just a prophet who calls Israel to be faithful.

Jesus is the Son of God.

He is the one who is well-pleasing to the Father.

He is all that Israel had failed to be.

He is the faithful and well-pleasing Son.

⁶ *When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.*

The vision of God is a terrifying thing!

Hearing the voice of the LORD is terrifying!

It is a *good* thing!

But we should never confuse “good” with “comfortable.”

⁷ *But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.”* ⁸ *And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*

Moses and Elijah are gone.

They had been told by the voice to listen to Jesus.

Jesus had said, “I do not come to abolish the law and the prophets,
but to fulfill them.”

If you want to understand Moses and Elijah, listen to Jesus.

And now, they see no one but Jesus only.

If you want to understand what the Kingdom of Jesus looks like in this age,
look at Jesus on the mount of transfiguration.

Peter refers to this in 2 Peter 1:16-18,

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you

the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.
For when he received honor and glory from God the Father,
and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory,
‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’
we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven,
for we were with him on the holy mountain.”

In other words,
the power and coming of Jesus in this age
is a power and a coming that is hidden by suffering.

Indeed, that is the point of verses 9-13:

2. Coming Down the Mountain: Elijah and the Suffering of the Son of Man (v9-13)

⁹*And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”*

Jesus does not want people to be distracted by stories of his glory
until he has first passed through his suffering.
Wait until I am raised from the dead!

¹⁰*And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”*

The disciples realize that Jesus has a different eschatology than the scribes,
and they are trying to figure out how Elijah fits into Jesus’ timeline.
They just saw Elijah on the mountain –
does that count as the “coming of Elijah” spoken of by Malachi?

Jesus answers by saying that *yes* the scribes are correct:

¹¹*He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹²But I tell you*

This is the same phrase, “I say to you” that Jesus used back in Matthew 5,
in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus contrasted “you have heard”
with “but I say to you.”

Jesus is claiming once again to give the authoritative interpretation of the Law.

I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” ¹³Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Think about that.

Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.
What sort of restoration did John the Baptist bring?

Not a political restoration!
Elijah came –
and Herod did to John the Baptist what Ahab had failed to do to Elijah!

He beheaded him.
John the Baptist is the Elijah who restored all things.
And what does John the Baptist have to show for it?
His head lying on a platter.

But that's Jesus' point!
"Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him,
but did to him whatever they pleased.
So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands."

John the Baptist restores all things – by getting beheaded.
This is a very strange way of restoring the Kingdom!
But this is why I look at the craziness in Washington, D.C., and I smile!

Jesus seems to think that John the Baptist *succeeded!*
The world would say, "Yeah, succeeded at getting himself killed!"

But Jesus told us:
In this world you will have trouble –
But take heart, Jesus said, for I have overcome the world!

How does Jesus overcome the world?
"So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands."
Do not be troubled by the politics of this age!
You might suffer and die – but where's the harm in that?!

A servant is not greater than his master.
If we are counted worthy to suffer for Christ, we should be honored!

This is why we need to pay attention to the second half of the chapter:
because the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection –
the pattern of the death and resurrection of the Beloved Son –
is the pattern for the Christian life as well.

3. Faith That Moves Mountains: the Death and Resurrection of the Son of Man (v14-27) **a. Faith Like a Grain of Mustard Seed (v14-20)**

¹⁴ And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, ¹⁵ said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water." ¹⁶ And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me." ¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, ^[b] and it ^[c] came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. ^[d] ¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus

privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁰ *He said to them, “Because of your little faith.*

In verses 14-20 Jesus returns with Peter, James, and John to the other nine disciples.

The nine have been trying to heal a sick boy – but they could not.

Many have seen a parallel to Moses coming down the mountain to find Israel engaged in idolatry.

Certainly there is a contrast between the glory on the top of the mountain and the faithless and twisted generation at the bottom of the mountain.

Why do the disciples fail?

Jesus had given them authority to cast out demons and heal the sick.

The reason why they failed was because of a lack of faith.

Notice that it was *not* a lack of faith on the part of the sick boy, or his father.

It was the little faith of the disciples!

Have you ever heard a faith healer use that as an excuse?

“I couldn’t heal you because I didn’t have enough faith!”

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Verse 20 sounds incredible.

You don’t need much faith to move mountains.

If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you can move mountains!

Now the language of “moving mountains” is, in one sense, hyperbole.

Jesus himself *certainly* had sufficient faith – but Jesus never moved a mountain.

No, Jesus stilled the waves, healed the sick, and cast out demons –

but it was never important to his mission to move a mountain.

It’s important to recognize that “faith” is not a power to be manipulated for your own benefit.

When Jesus says “nothing will be impossible for you,”

Jesus is not saying that faith is magic:

“I have faith, therefore I feel like turning this prince into a toad!”

Rather, the faith that Jesus commends is a faith in Jesus and his mission.

By faith you are able to do *anything* necessary for the mission of Jesus.

Because the *faith* that Jesus is talking about is not a magical property –

it is a particular faith *in Jesus*.

So, what is the problem with the disciples?

Jesus says that they have ‘little faith.’

They have *less* faith than a mustard seed.

And this becomes clear in verses 22-23:

b. Faith That Sees That the Way of the Cross Is the only Way to Glory (v22-23)

²² *As they were gathering^[1] in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed.*

They have begun to understand who Jesus is.

They do not yet understand what that means for the mission of Jesus.
They are distressed at the thought that the Son of Man will be killed,
and then raised on the third day.

Faith – true faith – sees that the way of the cross is the only way to glory.

The disciples do *not* see that.

Therefore they are distressed at the thought that Jesus must suffer.

Therefore they could not cast out the demon.

Remember what Jesus just told his disciples last chapter (16:24):

“If anyone would come after me,
let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
For whoever would save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus must die and be raised.

Therefore, if you would be his disciple,
then you must die.

Now, of course, the *goal* is not death!

The *goal* is resurrection!

You do not take up your cross because you think that crucifixion is fun!

You take up your cross because you see that the cross is the only way to glory!

And this is why we bear one another’s burdens –

whether caring for a dying old man,
or bringing food to a tired mother,
or encouraging those who are depressed and lonely,
or listening to those who are fearful and tired.

We are *not* the ones who bring resurrection glory.

That is what Jesus will do on the final day!

Rather, we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus suffered for us – therefore we share the sufferings, the burdens, of others –
but we do this because of our *hope* in resurrection glory.

c. Faith That Relies upon Our Father (v24-27)

²⁴ *When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?”* ²⁵ *He said, “Yes.”*

The two-drachma tax was an annual tax on all adult Jewish males.

It is sometimes called the “temple tax.”

In Exodus 30 there was a one-time payment of a half shekel required whenever a census was taken.

The Pharisees advocated paying the tax every year – a position opposed by the Sadducees.

There was no way to enforce collection except by persuasion.

In verse 25 Peter seems to assume that Jesus does pay the tax, but Jesus explains that this is not as a matter of obligation:

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?” ²⁶ *And when he said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free.*

If Jesus is the Son of God, then he should not be paying taxes to God.

A king does not tax his sons!

(In ancient Rome the wealthy were usually exempted from taxes!

Senators – the wealthiest people in the Roman republic – were tax exempt!)

Throughout human history, those who are closest to power do not pay taxes.

(tax loopholes have always been created by the rich for the rich!)

But Jesus makes it clear that he does not owe taxes for the temple!

But just because Jesus does not *owe* taxes does not mean that he will not pay:

²⁷ *However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel.^[g] Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.”*

Now, verse 27 is a little peculiar.

Jesus says “not to give offense” – not to put a stumbling block before them.

Since when did Jesus care about the “feelings” of the Pharisees?!

Jesus seems to make a hobby of “offending” Pharisees!

When his disciples said,

“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” (15:12)

Jesus had replied,

“Let them alone; they are blind guides.

And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” (15:14)

So why is Jesus now so concerned “not to give offense”?

There is an important distinction that Jesus makes here:
in previous instances, the Pharisees had fundamentally distorted the Law.
“for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” (15:6)

But the temple tax is simply a matter of custom.

The temple needs to be financially supported.
There are a variety of ways it could be done.
This is one way.

If you think about the history of church finance,
there is no single “thus saith the LORD” as to how to do it.

Back in the 18th and 19th centuries a lot of churches used “pew rents” –
where you would pay a certain amount per pew
(and in colder climates, the cheap seats were the cold one – far from the stove,
and the blazing hot ones – right next to the stove!)

Other churches used “subscriptions” where each member would pledge a certain amount.
Then people started “passing the plate” or having a box in the back.

Some customs may be better than others
(I’m not fond of the “pew rent” approach),
but we should be able to distinguish between essential things
and *adiaphora* – things that really don’t matter.

So what happened next?
Did Peter go fishing?
Possibly.
But the text doesn’t say – so I don’t know.

If Peter did go fishing – and he caught a fish – and he found a shekel in its mouth –
that would simply demonstrate Jesus’ point that by faith, nothing is impossible!
But it’s also possible that Jesus intended the fishing comment in the same way
that he intended the “faith moving mountains” comment.

If following Jesus requires that mountain to move,
then faith can move that mountain.
If following Jesus requires that the tax be paid,
then God will provide the money for that tax.