

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

FIGURING OUT JESUS-MORE OR LESS

Matthew 17:1-9

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said 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." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, my Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

DIAGNOSIS: Grounded by God's Old Math ($1 = 1$)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Not Listening to Jesus & Therefore Wit-less*

Peter, James and John are witless. Only six days prior, Jesus “began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering..., and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Like many students first learning a higher form of math, they hear the words but cannot make the new connections. The thought of Jesus being killed and raised simply does not compute. It goes beyond anything they ever heard in Moses and the prophets. Thus Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Settling for Less

And so, when Jesus marches them up a high mountain (think higher math) and he is transfigured before them (the multiple intelligences approach-same lesson different ways), they “figure” this is enough and would “settle for less.” In fact, “settling” is exactly what Peter has in mind in precise, mathematical correspondence to the revelation given-three booths, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. In doing so, Peter lumps Jesus in with Moses & Elijah as a “linear” continuation of God’s old familiar way of doing things through the law and prophets (God’s old math). Peter would gladly settle for something less than the greater grace that God would give. It seems safe, familiar and logical. “Lord, it’s good for us to be here.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Laid Out on the Ground, Overcome by Fear

The fatal (as in eternally deadly) limitations of the old math is shown when God in his full glory appears and the disciples fall to the ground overcome by fear; they are like dead men. As good as it may seem, living by the law and prophets is NOT what God desires. Faith in God’s crucified Son is what God wishes. Lacking that faith, we will always be overcome by fear before a God who then uses the old math and crunches the numbers on us

and demands nothing less than a perfect score. Even Moses, the lawgiver himself, ended up “grounded” on Mt. Nebo, seeing the glory to come, but never himself quite reaching the Promised Land. The prophet Elijah, trusting in the promise, fared much better. He was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Yet, even he was the precursor of something more. Peter is wrong. It is not “good for us to be here.” Not, if it means ending up dead. The math of the law is very “linear”: 1 sin =’s 1 death per person. No more. No less. Peter says nothing. Dead men don’t say much.

PROGNOSIS: Mobilized by God’s New Math ($C2M = E$)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *God Speaking through his Crucified Son*

What is “good for us,” is that God comes and speaks to us another way. God speaks to us through his crucified and risen Son—a dead man raised. Jesus cannot be lumped with Moses and Elijah. He is not the same as either one of them. Jesus is neither simply “law” nor “promise.” Rather, he is the fulfillment of the law and promise in a most illogical way. He dies, and yet he lives. He is the sinless Son of God, and yet, he is baptized into a death for sinners. His face shines like the sun and his clothes are a dazzling white, and yet, his head will be impaled with a crown of thorns and his naked, bleeding body hammered to a cross. Jesus is a most unusual, paradoxical, incongruous way for God to speak to us. And yet, he is God’s ultimate way of speaking, which is what is meant when God exclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (v. 5). This is the gospel (news that is good for us).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Moving on to More*

This amazing “day seven” Sunday school lesson was not over yet. It would take another mountain (Calvary) and another “Sabbath”

uncharted by the law of Moses, an Easter Sunday, a day of resurrection, a new beginning, the first day of new creation, before they really got the point. Hence Jesus' command, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (v. 9). But, when it happened as he said, and he died and rose, they caught on to the amazing power of this new math. We die. And yet, we live. We sin. And yet, we are forgiven. We fall to the ground in valid fear of God. And yet, there is a Risen Lord who says to us, "Get up and do not be afraid" (v. 7). Life in Christ is not "linear" according to the law. But, rather everything is "relative"-relative to the crucified Jesus (the beloved Son of God); and relative to who we are when we are baptized into his death and resurrection too (more sons and daughters in Christ...kids with whom God is well pleased...and cruciformed actors through whom God speaks in down-to-earth ways). Transfiguration Sunday is not an end in itself, but a transition day that propels us on to something more: first Lent...and then Easter...and then PENTECOST!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Telling Everyone, i.e. Wit-ness

The transfiguration of Jesus took place prior to the cross. But Easter has happened...and so has Pentecost. And so, the command, "Tell no one," now becomes the commission "To tell EVERYONE!" Those who were so wit-less become a reliable source of wit-ness. The word "wit" suggests "the power to evoke laughter by remarks showing swift perception, especially of the incongruous." The cross may make little sense. But when we catch on that God is more interested in love than in keeping scores, it tickles us with joy just as much as it tickles God. $E = MC^2$ is a much more powerful equation than $1 = 1$, especially when we turn the equation around and do the math the way God does it: $C^2M = E$. Christ crucified and raised (C^2) x the Witness-Mission (martyria) of his disciples (mathetes) (M) = 's Good News for

EVERYONE (E). Now that's power!