

What We Need God For

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Hymn: "O Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair!" (*LSB* 413)

As we said a few Sundays ago, the season of Epiphany is all about who Jesus is, Him making Himself known. And for us Lutherans the Epiphany season culminates in the Feast of the Transfiguration. I say "us Lutherans," because not everybody celebrates Transfiguration at the end of Epiphany. If you were Roman Catholic, you would celebrate it on August 6. That's because in 1456, the pope at the time got word from a messenger about a military victory that was accomplished over the Turks in the City of Belgrade and he decided then to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration.

Locating Transfiguration at the end of the Epiphany season is to me much more pleasing, liturgically and otherwise. It works as this high point from which we enter the Lenten season and serves so nicely as a kind of bookend. On the front end of Epiphany, of course, is the Baptism of our Lord. And so the whole season gets bracketed by these two events, the Baptism and the Transfiguration, which have this common element, the infusion of the heavenly voice—God says, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." At both His Baptism and His Transfiguration, Jesus receives this endorsement from the Father in heaven, which causes me to revise something I've been saying throughout our Gospel of John class about Jesus not needing any one's approval. The approval of God the Father, that endorsement Jesus *will* accept.

But even Moses and Elijah are not there to add their imprimatur or put their stamp of approval on Jesus' Messiahship. And I say that over against the Collect of the Day which tends to give the impression that Moses and Elijah are there in order to say,

“Yeah, this is him,” to endorse Jesus. But I want to suggest this morning that that’s not the primary reason they’re there, and that’s not the way to understand their presence.

On the contrary, Moses and Elijah are invited to this particular event for the purpose of their dismissal. They appear in order to disappear. Moses and Elijah, these great representatives of Israel’s history, the great liberator and lawgiver on the one hand and the great prophet on the other, who in some sense emblematically represent the Old Testament Scriptures as well, the Law and the Prophets, are there to fade into the background as a way of signaling that they have served their purpose and that now they are in a sense dated. This is not to demean them or diminish them. They functioned in the manner they were meant to function in their time and season. But now those days are gone. There is this new revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Everything about God that we are to understand about God is to be seen through the lens of the person of Jesus Christ. Trying somehow to square Jesus and to make him fit into previous conceptions of God, or to see what possibly he might have in common with Moses and Elijah, that’s like putting new wine into old wineskins. We are not to do that any more. Jesus brings Moses and Elijah there on stage to say, “Thank you, fellows, I appreciate all that you have done, but your time is past. It’s time to go.” They disappear and the text very pointedly tells us Jesus is left all alone. “And they saw no one but Jesus only.”

But theirs is not the only departure at the Mount of Transfiguration. On the surface it’s very natural to read it that way—Moses and Elijah disappear. But it’s also the case that the Father who speaks from the clouds at this point in the story checks out. He walks off stage. he leaves. He is done. At least for a time. His departure is signaled for us by the admonition about Jesus that he tacks on at the end. At Jesus’

baptism, God said, “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased.” And He says the exact same thing here. But then He adds, “Listen to him.” That’s a curious addition. Why would that be? Well, it’s for the same reason a parent will say to the children when going out. The parent might say, I’m putting your older sister in charge; I’m putting your older brother in charge. Listen to her. Do what he tells you.” Which, of course, never happens. The younger sibling will never respect the older sibling. But the expectation has been set. Same thing here. God the Father is leaving. He’s done. He’s checking out. If you read the Passion narratives, read them in their entirety, you will begin to see and realize that God the Father is gone from the story. He no longer appears in any fashion.

The Passion narratives—the accounts of Jesus’ agony in the Garden, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and burial— portray for us a world without God. God the Father has absented Himself from the scene and this is how things go. And they do not go very well, at least as far as we can see.

This is especially disturbing when you realize this is the kind of world we are trying to make for our selves in this modern age, where God is cropped out of the picture. And undoubtedly that will lead to the same sort of mayhem and chaos, murder, betrayal, and seething hate, that permeates the Passion narrative. Here is what *we* make of things. Here is what happens when *man* takes over management of the world. When Jesus cries that cry of dereliction of the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken You?” He is not exaggerating. He is not hyperbolizing. God the Father has left the scene. And why? Why has God exited, left the stage? Perhaps it is because he could not possibly bear to watch the horrors that would be enacted. But perhaps more

likely it's because He was no longer needed. For what Jesus had to do, for what Jesus was called upon to do, God the Father was not necessary. And that which Jesus was called upon to do, of course, was die. That He could do all by Himself. All on his own. It would actually go quicker with the Father out of the picture.

As it happens, it's what you can do all by yourself, too. You can die. This is what we do. In a manner of speaking, it's really all that we have to do in life. Everything else, every other goal that we set for ourselves, is just things that we tack on. Which is not to say that you shouldn't try to do anything else. But all that we have to do is die. Which raises the question, What do we really need God for? We can die. We can kill one another. We have become very proficient at that. In the face of so many horrors and atrocities, including ones that were enacted in the twentieth century and are going on even now as we sit here, where is God? This is the challenging question put to us all the time, isn't it? How can God allow something like this to happen? Part of the answer is that this isn't God. This isn't God's doing. This is what human beings do. This is what happens when man takes over and God is cut out.

Why has God left? And where is He? He's still there. He's still in the fray in the person of His Son Jesus. In fact, God the Father left Jesus in charge. But Jesus has the same problem the older sibling does when the parents leave home. Who's going to listen to him? Jesus goes around talking about love and forgiveness and mercy and patience and turning the other cheek, but that doesn't seem to soften the savage beasts that roam the jungle of the world. They just laugh at that sort of thing. Just like the older sibling left in charge, Jesus is dead meat. Who's going to listen to him? And you know what happens at home when the parents leave and the older sibling says you

should do this? At some point one of the younger siblings is going to say, You going to make me? You and what army? And that older sibling just hopes and prays that the parents come home sooner rather than later.

God the Father does return to the story. He departs at the Transfiguration but He does return. He returns again at the resurrection to raise His Son from the dead. God the Father returns to the scene as a resurrector, because this is what God does. So, to answer the question, what do we need God for? You don't need Him to die, but you do need Him to live. This is the new image that God wishes to project, the One who gives life, the Resurrector, which is very clearly and very crisply shown in the person of the Son. Remember: Your whole view of God, your whole perception of who God is needs to be run through the image of the Son. In Jesus is a resurrector. In fact, He never crossed paths with a dead person whom He did not raise. This is God. This is the God that Moses and Elijah were unable to see from their particular vantage point in history. And I don't know what they would have thought of this God, anyway. They might have been a little uncomfortable about it. I don't know if Moses would have liked to hear that Pharaoh and his hosts might resurface again. I don't know what Elijah would have thought after he executed 450 prophets of Baal. Moses and Elijah just did not fully see, could not clearly see everything of what God is. They got their peeks, their hints, and their intimations of God. Moses saw God's back side. Elijah heard him in the still small voice. But they did not see Him clearly until on the Mount of Transfiguration. They did not until then see Jesus as the real deal, the image of God.

So, you can do just like Jesus did, you can navigate this world, this violent, hate-filled world, and you can reach death as a conclusion all by yourself. You can manage it

all by yourself. And you can succeed. And in that sense no one is a failure. But to live, to really live, you need God. And to live well and to face death and not to be so panicked and cowed by it as to take as many people with you in the process, which is what people do, to not be utterly possessed by hate and fury and desperation at your fate, there has to be hope that at the other end of your own passion narrative, there is the God who raises the dead. Jesus had nobody but himself. He was left all alone. Even his disciples abandoned him. But you have Jesus. You have Jesus here, His body and blood, and you have Jesus in everybody around you who speaks resurrection words and language to you, which are words of love and of encouragement and of mercy and of forgiveness. And by that we are kept afloat in life by Jesus, this Jesus whom we find most particularly and most precisely here in this place, in this Sacrament, and in one another, the body of Christ that gathers around His gifts.

I don't know and I don't completely understand how they do it who do without Jesus, without His Sacrament, without the communion of saints. I suppose they're still able to make their way through life and they're still able to die, but I think they have a hard time of it. The fear of death causes us only to push ourselves farther and farther away from one another and farther into death's isolation. One can manage, I suppose. Anyone can die. Any child, any old person. But the trick is to live a life that is fuller and for that you need Jesus and this is where Jesus is. Thanks be to God!

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