

Good Friday: Seeing Jesus Correctly

Matthew 17:1-12

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Dan Hoffman

Welcome to Hartland and to the annual joint NAB Good Friday service. I'm Dan, if you don't know me. I am one of the pastors at Fort George. And I always like it when we get together as a larger group. Do you like this?

It's a here we remind ourselves that Jesus' church is bigger than our church. We aren't the fullness of His bride by ourselves. And it isn't just us NAB who are recognizing this reality this morning. There are several churches across the city joining together to celebrate the unity that Jesus obtained for us by going to the cross on our behalf. With His blood He purchased the right for us to become children of God.

So there is great diversity in God's family, but are no step children. God's kingdom isn't a blended family. Instead we come together as joint heirs with Christ, covered by Jesus' blood, and standing before one Father. And we do this in a big part because of what happened 2000 years ago on this day. It is a Good Friday. Amen?

This morning I want to take you to a text we don't normally associate with being a Good Friday text. So if you brought a Bible, or have one on your phone, open it up to Matthew 17 so you can follow along.

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When I was a student and lived in Vancouver, one of my favorite places to go hiking was the Chief near Squamish. I'm sure several of you have done this climb. The hike starts in the forest. It's lush, it's dark. The tree growth is tight as is typical of high precipitation forests. And then, after about an hour and a half of sweat and struggle, all of a sudden the forest opens up and you find yourself on the top of a granite slab towering 2,300 feet, 700 meters, over Squamish and the Howe Sound inlet. And from the top you can sit with your legs dangling over the edge, feel the wind at your back, and be on top of the world. It's an incredibly glorious experience.

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Today we are going to look at a mountaintop experience in scripture. And lots of incredible things happen on mountains in the Bible. So Moses went up the mountain and into a thick cloud. And from the darkness the voice of God spoke and Moses received the Law. And this experience changed him. In fact after meeting with God his faced glowed so that he had to wear a veil so he wouldn't scare his neighbours. Do you scare your neighbours... because you look like Jesus?

Elijah went up the mountain and he too experienced the presence of God. But God was not in the powerful wind or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the quiet whisper.

Jesus preached His most powerful sermon on the mount, and He gave the Great Commission on the mount. But among all of these mountain top experiences one stands out as utterly unique. And that one is Jesus' transfiguration.

In this story the Father pulls back Jesus' veil to reveal His divine nature. And this moment is "the only time in Jesus' earthly career (including His resurrection appearances) where His dignity is made gloriously... clear to the church."¹

But this story doesn't exist by itself, it has a context that lends itself to Good Friday. And so I want to unpack this encounter from two angles. My hope is that to today we can look through the transfiguration and the cross to see Jesus' glory as He is both the Son of God and the Son of Man.

Let's read the text starting in verse 1. Matthew 17:1-12:

[Read Matthew 17:1-12]

Now Matthew places this story in a section dedicated to unpacking Jesus' identity. So just 15 verses before – Matthew 16:13 – Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi and He asks His disciples: "Who do people say *the Son of Man* is?"

The Son of Man is Jesus' favorite way of talking about Himself. It's a complicated group of syllables with a ton of meaning, but at the most basic level when He speaks like this, Jesus is affirming His humanity – He is the son of Mary and Joseph.

Now this might seem strange to us, but the earliest heresy the church fought was against the Gnostics who doubted whether Jesus was really human. For them to be human was to be sinful, and Jesus obviously wasn't that. And so they figured maybe He only appeared to be man. You could see Him and touch Him, but if you looked carefully you would notice that He didn't leave any footprints in the sand – He was kind of like Legolas walking on the snow.

But this isn't true. Jesus was fully man. And He affirmed this most blatantly by calling Himself Son of Man.

Of course Son of Man is a little more complicated than that. These words find their root in the book of Daniel where they come as the title of an exalted being. And so even as Jesus is affirming His humanity, He is hinting that there is something more. But for the purpose of today we are going to say that when Jesus called Himself the Son of Man He was affirming His humanity.

And so Jesus asks, "who people say the Son of Man is?" And the disciples know He is talking about Himself, and they respond: "Funny You ask, because consensus hasn't come in yet. Some think you are John the Baptist come back from the dead – he just lost his head. Others think you are one of the prophets – like Elijah or Jeremiah. Really people don't know, but they think You are something great."

¹ Brunner, F.D. "The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28" (WB Eerdmans Pub Co, Grand Rapids), 2004. Pg 166

And Jesus cuts them off and says, “Okay, but who do you say that I am?”

And to this Peter responds with His famous words:

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)

So we have this contrast. Jesus asked “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And Peter responds: “You’re the Son of God.” He nails it! And Jesus replies “You are blessed Simon, because I know you, and you did not come up with this on your own. God revealed this to you. The Father has told you who I am. I am His Son. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church.

Now if you are Peter in this moment, you are having a good day. This is the boss turning to you in front of your colleges and saying “Do you see this guy? This is how you do it. He’s got it right. This is above and beyond. Way to go Peter.” And if you’ve ever been commended like that you know what it feels like.

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This isn’t in the Bible, but I picture Peter sitting there trying hard to pretend he is humble. He feels good. And he still has that smug look on His face when Jesus turns around and starts explaining that He is going to go to Jerusalem to suffer. Yes, He is the Son of God, but He’s going to be weak. He’s going to get worked by the religious people, the elders and the chief priests. And it’s going to go so badly that they are going to kill him.

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And Peter’s smirk becomes a question mark. And then it strengthens into something else. The star pupil has the opportunity to correct the teacher.

Now academics have never really been my thing – I struggled through – but I’ve always had smart friends. I remember sitting beside Andrew Weins in grade 11 physics and him looking quizzically at the equation on the blackboard – I was looking quizzically too, but that’s because I was just realizing we weren’t in Foods class anymore – and then Andrew said “I think you mixed that around. That alpha is supposed to go outside the bracket not inside.” The teacher, who might be in this room so we will just call him the teacher, looked and then consulted his notes, and finally said – you’re right. And the class loved it. I loved it. There is just something beautiful about catching the teacher in a mistake. Have you ever had that opportunity?

Well this is Peter, but he’s not in physics. And it isn’t the Teacher who has misspoken.

Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Matthew 16:23)

I am going to die Peter. It’s my job. Just like Elijah who came before – you called him John – he prepared you for me, but he died. And so the Son of Man is going to suffer too. I’ve come to be the substitute man for humanity. Every human needs a sacrifice to replace themselves and take the punishment for their sin, and I am the Son of Man. I am the perfect human, and so I alone am able to be that sacrifice.

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Friends, there is a glory in Jesus as the Son of Man. But it's not a shining glory, it's a humble glory only seen in afterthought. The glory of Jesus as the Son of Man is that He emptied Himself of glory in order to walk as we walk. Philippians 2 says:

[Jesus], being in very nature God...
 He made Himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 He humbled Himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Because Jesus is the Son of Man we don't have a high priest today who is unable to sympathize with our weakness. Instead we have one who was tempted in every way as we are. And yet was able to rise above without sin.²

My friend Mansour, who grew up Muslim, tells of complaining often to Allah when he was tempted, "you don't know what it's like to be human. It's too hard to overcome this on my own." But when he came to Christ he realized both that this excuse had been taken away, and, because Jesus' Spirit now resided in him, he had been empowered to overcome. This is the glory of the Son of Man – a glory only realized by His disciples in afterthought.

Do you know that glory this morning? Do you know that the only reason you can sit here in communion with brothers and sisters before one Father is that one Man – a man like you – took your place and your sin upon Himself and overcame it on your behalf. That's one side of the glorious good news of Good Friday. Do you know it?

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But of course there is more. In our text today, 17 verse 1, Six days later. Six days after forcefully stating that He was the Son of Man, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain by themselves. This is the context of the transfiguration.

And then, verse 2, Jesus' face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as light. And God spoke and said "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"

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That last part cracks me up. I love how God knows how pathetically prone to distraction we are. You might think it would go without saying that if a voice from heaven – a voice instantly identifiable as God Himself – said of someone "This is My Son" then by default you would listen to what this Son was saying. Well that might be true in textbook humanity, but this is Peter we are talking about – he's proved he can miss stuff – and it is you and me.

² Hebrews 4:15

Have you ever found yourself in a spot knowing exactly what it means to live a God-honouring life, and choosing disobedience, doubt, faithlessness, lust, envy instead? Have you ever looked on the glory of God and decided it wasn't enough?

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And so God preaches here and makes the obvious application plain: Oh, and by the way, this means I want you to listen to what Jesus says."

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Now there are lots of scriptures about the voice of God. So in Deuteronomy we read:
 You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.
 (Deuteronomy 13:4 NASB)

But in texts like this we are expected to hear God's voice in our hearts as we meditate on His word. God's audible voice is very rare. In fact Jesus only gets it three times. So don't hold out for this for yourself. You're not as important as Jesus. The Father is the Ultimate Being of few words.

And yet, get this, of the three times God speaks to Jesus, or arguably about Jesus to us, two of those time He speaks the same thing. So the odd ball out comes in John 12 while Jesus is praying "Father, glorify Your name. Then a voice thundered from heaven "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." So that's one time God speaks.

But the remaining two times the audible voice of God shows up in Jesus' life He says exactly the same thing.

So John didn't want to baptize Jesus. He tried to get out of it. But Jesus said "Do it, it's proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." I need to get baptized to show that I'm God's man. And so John consented. And then we read:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16-17)

Now just compare that to verse 4 of our text where God says "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." God says exactly the same thing twice.

But God doesn't ramble. God isn't some aging man who gets caught up telling the same stories over and over again. No. God repeats Himself to Jesus for us. He wants to make sure we've got this. He wants to make sure we don't miss seeing Jesus for who He really is. The Father is saying: "All My authority, the authority of the sovereign God of the universe, stands behind My Son. Don't miss what He says."

And the Father sends Moses and Elijah to make this statement as big as possible. Moses represents the Law. So when it comes to knowing what God wanted from His people there is no one like Moses to speak to that. This is I speak for God Moses. This is drop 10 plagues on Egypt Moses. This is disagree with me and God will open the earth up and swallow your family Moses. And now Moses is on the mountain.

And Elijah is there too. He's the poster-boy prophet. There are lots of awesome prophets in the Old Testament, but not like Elijah. So it's rare to get struck by lightning, but four times in Elijah's career fire falls from heaven to strike what he's aiming at. Coincidence? I wouldn't push that. And lots of prophets hear the voice of God in their hearts, but Elijah hears God's audibly whisper. And then nobody gets to go to heaven without dying, but Elijah hails a fiery cab and rides there in style.

So these are awesome guys. And the disciples know right away who they are. And I don't think they are wearing name tags. These are the heroes of their faith. And yet in verse 3 notice that both Moses and Elijah are looking at Jesus. Their glory, which was incredible, was there simply to be eclipsed by Jesus.

So sure Moses' face shone in a way that terrified Israel. But in this moment it was like when you look up at lunch and see the pale silhouette of the moon. What, the night before was so glorious, as it was surrounded by stars, looks opaque and frail next to the greater glory of the sun. Nothing is frightening about Moses now.

And sure Elijah's words had power. Kings and captains of the guard quaked when he threatened, but next to the voice of Jesus he is junior elementary. Nothing is frightening about Elijah now.

Both these guys are fixated on Jesus. They are there for Him and they are talking.

Now have you ever been at Starbucks and the people behind you are having a great conversation? And you just find yourself pretending to read your book while you eavesdrop on them? Nobody does this? Just me? Nobody's going to sit near me again! Wouldn't you love to eavesdrop on what Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about?

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Matthew doesn't say, but lucky for us Luke let's us know. He writes:

Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about His departure, which He was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30-31)

Moses and Elijah are there to encourage Jesus as He brings His own departure into fruition – now that might sound like Jesus is heading on vacation, but we know better. Nobody is going to take Jesus' life from Him, He is going to lay it down.

And into this God Himself speaks to Peter, James and John about Jesus, "This is My Son. I love Him. I'm pleased with Him. Now, sit up and pay attention to what He says."

And here's where this comes together, the primary thing that Jesus has said at this point is that He is going to die. It's in this moment that the Son of Man and the Son of God are intimately connected for the first time. What God is saying is that you can't have one without the other. Jesus is the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God together. He the Servant King; He is the I AM born in a stable. He is always both these things together. You can't have the crown without the cross. Easter Sunday can't come without Good Friday. And this is the picture God gives us in the transfiguration. In the transfiguration God helps us see Jesus well. He helps us see Him as Son of Man and Son of God.

And then we get verse 6.

[Read Matthew 17:6]

Put yourself there in that moment. When the glory of God shows up and we see Jesus' divine side the only option is worship. This is Isaiah in the year King Uzziah died. This is Joshua standing before the Commander of the Lord's armies, and Moses at the burning bush. Trembling, shoes are off, face is in the dirt in fear. But this time something is different. This is Jesus. Look at verse 7:

[Read Matthew 17:7-8]

Jesus is not just the Son of God, He is the Son of Man. And so He isn't just the holy separateness of God, He is the grace of God as well. He is the mediator between a holy God and sinful humanity. And so here He stoops to touch His cowering disciples and raise them up.

Do you see the beauty there? Do you see the hope? Do you see Jesus for who He is?

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If you do, what do you do with what you see?

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I want to look finally at how Peter is tempted to respond after encountering Jesus as both Son of Man and Son of God. In verse 4 we read:

[Read Matthew 17:4-5a]

Peter wants to stay on the mountain. He wants to build some shelters and hang out with Moses, Elijah and glowing Jesus.

I believe this is our temptation as well. The church is a comfortable place for Jesus followers. This is the place we practice seeing God in and through each other. This is the place we are family. And like every family we have traditions that don't make sense to those outside. We talk about being redeemed, and sanctified. And come on - we eat and drink His body and blood to remember His death. We do weird things. But they are our weird things. It's safe to want to just hang out with Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

And in and of itself this isn't a bad desire. In fact one day, if we have given ourselves to living with and for Christ, we will live in a land with no need for the sun because the glory of God will give it light, and the Lamb will be its lamp.³ But today is not that day. Today is a day of mission.

And so Jesus has a purpose to inviting Peter, James, John and us into seeing who He is. And that purpose is that we might have something to give to those around us. Friends, salvation isn't primarily for us, it is for us to give away.

And so as Peter is proposing his great idea – let's hang out here, I'll start building houses – God cuts him off. Verse 5 says "while he was still speaking" I like that. Aren't you glad God interrupts before we have time to flesh out all our terrible ideas?

And God interrupts Peter to let him know that there are active implications that we enter into once we have seen Jesus correctly.

In the 1600's the early Reformers ripped the roofs off monasteries. They did this, not because good stuff wasn't happening in the monasteries, but because it couldn't stay there.

The good news about Jesus being both man and God - both able to substitute Himself for us and cover our sin with God's infinite grace – is intrinsically evangelistic. If we actually understand, then this message demands that we get excited about what we have seen and spread it around.

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But this seems to clash with what we get in verse 9.

[Read Matthew 17:9]

Don't tell anyone? Really?! Don't tell anyone you've just witnessed the most incredible moment ever experienced on a mountain? Don't tell anyone that God Himself has pulled back Jesus' veil and revealed Him to be YHWH among us? Don't tell anyone?!

That's right. But that was for them, not for us. Here is why:

First, at this point Peter, James and John had seen Jesus as both Son of Man and Son of God, but they weren't able to put this together yet. Even after hearing God tell them to listen to Jesus, who had said He was going to die, they weren't able to embrace that.

Peter was still going to take out his sword and chop ears. James and John, the sons of thunder, were still going to run away. They didn't get it. And they wouldn't get it until the Son of Man had been raised from the dead. It would only be then, and after the Holy Spirit had filled them that they would become Jesus' witness.

³ Revelation 21:23

But that's where we are today. We have seen the Son of Man and the Son of God together. And Jesus' Spirit in us. So it is our job to give away what we've experienced.

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So brothers and sisters, it's Good Friday, and if you've seen Jesus on the mountain. If He's revealed Himself to you as Substitute and Saviour then you know Easter Sunday is coming. Yes, Jesus the man died in our place, but Jesus the Son of God was way too powerful for death to hold and He conquered the grave. And this is news too good to keep to ourselves.

So stop building shelters on the mountain. Stop trying to enjoy the future promise of rest in eternity, and embrace the mission implied by seeing Jesus well.

Friends, here is the "Listen to Him" for us today. Who is it that Jesus has placed you beside that He wants you to shine His light into? It's not an accident you live where you do, and work where you do, and have the relatives you do. In His infinite wisdom the sovereign God of the universe has uniquely crafted and empowered you to be the ideal reflection of His light in your circumstance. It's Good Friday and Jesus' glory is on display. It is the glory of the Son of God and the Son of Man. And because of what we've seen it's time to head down the mountain and into Prince George.

Would you pray with me?