

The Right Path  
Matthew 17:1 – 9; 2 Peter 1:16 – 21  
Sunday, February 23, 2020

Back at the beginning of January, I was getting ready to go out to Pittsburgh for two weeks of doctoral classes. I had it all planned out: I would lead worship, leave right after it was over, and get there just in time for the kickoff of the Eagles playoff game on tv. As I was standing at the door greeting people after worship, Liz Ward came up and said, “There was a really bad accident on the turnpike this morning around New Stanton (about 35 miles outside of Pittsburgh), and it’s still shut down. You might want to check that out before you leave.” But in my infinite wisdom, I thought, “That’s *four hours* from here, and the accident happened at 3:30 this morning. *Surely* by the time I get there, it will all be cleared up and the turnpike will be open again.”

As I got in my car to leave, I pulled up the GPS on my phone, and it told me to go up toward State College instead of straight across on the turnpike. Well, I thought, “That will add over an *hour* to my trip, and I won’t make it there in time to see the kickoff of the Eagles game. Besides, by the time I get out that way, the turnpike should be open again. So forget that. I’m going the way I want to go.” And everything was fine – I was making great time – until I was around three hours in, and this big electronic sign popped up on the side of the road that said, “Turnpike closed. Detour ahead.”

So I got off at the Breezewood exit, along with every other car on the road, and we crept *very slowly* up to Highway 30. It took about 30 minutes to go a mile. But right when I got up there, ready to turn onto Highway 30, my GPS chimed in and said, “Hey, turn around and go back to the turnpike!” So I thought, “Oh! It must be open again!” I turned around and drove *very slowly* back to the turnpike because there was *so much* traffic. When I got to the Easy Pass station, there were some men standing on the side of the road in orange vests, talking to each of

the drivers ahead of me. And *they* told me, “No, it’s not open yet. You need to turn around and go all the way back where you just came from. Don’t listen to your GPS. Turn it off. Follow these directions.” And they handed me a slip of paper that had the route on it.

I turned around, and it took me 30 more minutes to go that mile that I had just come from. I can’t even tell you what route I took after that. I just followed the directions that he gave me. All the way there, I had no idea where I was. It was dark, and I had never been on that road before, and my GPS was off. I had *no idea* if I was on the right path; if I was going the right way. I was just trusting the directions that he gave me. It took me two hours longer than it should have, but I eventually made it in time to see the second half of the Eagles game (which it turned out didn’t really matter anyway).

The reason that I tell you this story is because I think that one of the central questions of these scripture readings that we heard today is, “How do we know we’re on the right path?” When the world around us is dark and unfamiliar, and everyone else is telling us to go *this* way, how do we know we’re on the right path?

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We usually think of the Transfiguration as this great, glorious moment when the lordship of Jesus Christ is revealed, and the disciples finally *see* him for who he is and *understand* who he is. They *get it*. But look at what their response is. Jesus’ is transformed before them – light starts radiating out from his face and his clothes – and then suddenly Moses and Elijah (who have been dead for *hundreds* of years) are standing there next to him, talking with him. A bright cloud covers them, and a voice booms out from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” And it says that the disciples fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.

They were *terrified*! This wasn't a great, glorious moment for them. It had to be *incredibly* confusing. They had to make sense out of what they had just seen and experienced. And *how* do you make sense out of something like this? By *talking* about it. But as they are coming back down the mountain, Jesus says to them, "Don't tell anyone about what you have just seen until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." So now they can't *talk* about it, but also, what does *that* mean? The *Son of Man*? And what is he talking about *raised from the dead*? How did Peter, James, and John make sense out of this and know that they were on the right path, interpreting this experience and their faith correctly?

Well, they *do* talk about it with each other, and they ask questions to Jesus. And what they do is, they turn back to scripture. They talk about Elijah and try to figure out how this experience fits within that larger story in scripture. So they interpret their experience through scripture to make sure that they're on the right path and understanding things correctly. And then we don't really hear anything else about this experience until Peter's letter.

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Around 40 years later, as Peter is nearing the end of his life, about to be killed by the Romans, he writes a letter to a group of Christians who are trying to figure out if *they* are on the right path. The people around them are challenging their faith, saying that it's all just a bunch of *myths*, just stories that the apostles have made up, and that Jesus is *not* coming back. And these Christians are hearing this and starting to say, "What if they're right?"

Now, what we *do* know is that at that time there was a group called the Epicureans that were very publicly skeptical of what they called the "myths" of the Christians. Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who lived about 300 years before Jesus. And what the Epicureans believed was that

the ultimate purpose of life, the *sole intrinsic goal of life* was *pleasure*. Avoiding pain and fear and pursuing whatever gives your body and your mind pleasure. Epicureans believed that you should live in such a way as to derive the greatest amount of pleasure possible during your life, because there is nothing *after* that. They rejected the notion of an afterlife. And while they believed in the existence of God, they said that God does not intervene in the affairs of the world. God *created* but doesn't get involved. One Epicurean writing sums it up this way, "Don't fear God; don't worry about death; what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure."<sup>1</sup>

So these Epicureans were challenging the Christians and saying, "You really believe all this? You weren't even here to see it. It's been 40 years. If Jesus was coming back, surely he would have done so by now. And don't worry about the afterlife. That's just a scare tactic to control your behavior and keep you in line. Just go enjoy yourself and don't worry about all this other stuff." And these Christians start questioning, "How do we know that we're on the right path, believing the right thing, interpreting things correctly, living the right way when the world around us is telling us something different?"

I want you to think for a minute about how *familiar* that sounds. "You really believe all this? You weren't even here to see it. It's been 2,000 years. If Jesus was coming back, surely he would have done so by now. And don't worry about the afterlife. That's just a scare tactic to control your behavior and keep you in line. Just go enjoy yourself and don't worry about all this other stuff." How do *we* know that we're on the right path, believing the right thing, interpreting things correctly, living the right way when the world around us is telling us something different?

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<sup>1</sup> Philodemus of Gadara, *Herculaneum Papyrus*, 1005, 4.9-14

It's to these questions that Peter writes and says, "You know what? I *was* there. I was an *eyewitness* to the majesty and glory of God in Jesus Christ. I was *on* that holy mountain. I *saw* the Transfiguration. I *heard* the voice from heaven. I can *confirm* the prophetic message. Christ *will* come again. The glory that was seen on that holy mountain *will be seen again* in *all of creation*. That," he says, "is the promise that scripture makes to us." That's what he's talking about when he talks about "the prophetic message." The prophets in scripture talk about the glory of God coming to earth and redeeming all of creation. Peter says, "We got a *glimpse* of that in the Transfiguration. We have not yet received the *fullness* of it, but it's coming."

What Peter doing *here* is exactly what he did with James and John when they were coming back down that mountain. He's saying, "Look back to scripture. You want to know you're on the right path, understanding all of this correctly? Look back to scripture. Be attentive to it as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." It's like when I was driving out to Pittsburgh. It was dark, and I didn't know if I was going the right way. All I had to guide me was the written words that someone else had given me. So I had to be *attentive* to that. And eventually, it got me where I was supposed to go.

We live in dark, uncertain times. We don't always know if we're on the right path, doing the right thing, living the right way. And the world around us keeps saying, "Don't go *that* way. Go *this* way. It's a lot easier; there's more pleasure and less pain. Don't fear God. Don't worry about death. What is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure." The world around us says, "Buy more stuff. A bigger house. A nicer car. Better clothes. Have another drink. Get *whatever* you want, *whenever* you want it, *however* you can get it. You deserve it."

But *God* says, “This is my beloved Son. You want to know if you’re on the right path? *Listen to him*. Be *attentive* to him. Because *he* is your lamp shining in the darkness. *He* is the morning star that will rise in your heart.” And what Jesus tells us – what he *shows* us in his life, death, and resurrection – is that the path to glory is not about *avoiding* pain and suffering. It is about remaining *faithful*, to God and to each other, in the *midst* of pain and suffering.

How do we *know* this? How do we “listen to him” today? By looking back to scripture. By saying, “This challenge that I’m facing, this temptation that I’m experiencing, this decision that I have to make, what did Jesus say about this?” You want to know if you’re on the right path? Look back to scripture at the people who have faithfully travelled that path before. This is why it is *so important* for us to be grounded in scripture, not just here on Sunday mornings, but each day. And we might say, “I don’t have *time* for that,” but we have time to read *newspapers*. We have time to read our *phones* and check *social media*. We have time for the words of this world. But if we want to truly *understand* this world, we *must* make time for the words of God.

And the good news that Peter shares with us here is that these ancient words are not the *only* way that we listen to Jesus today. The Holy Spirit – the living, breathing presence of God with us today – guides us and teaches us and strengthens us in our faith and helps us *understand* scripture. Peter says, “No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation...but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” God has not left us alone to figure all of this out and find our own way through life. We *know* Jesus and *hear* Jesus today through the power of the Holy Spirit. And through one another. Just as Peter, James, and John had to make sense out of their experience together, *we* are called to walk with one another through life and help each other make sense out of life and faith and scripture. We say to one another, “I think *this* is what scripture is saying to me, and *this* is what God is calling me to do,” and the

community of faith around us says, “*Yes*, that sounds like the voice of God to me,” or, “I’m not so sure. Maybe we need to look at this again.” The question is whether we trust God and each other enough to *do* that.

You want to know if you’re on the right path? Listen to Jesus. Look to scripture, look to the community of faith, and the Holy Spirit will speak through *those* voices to lead us in the way that God is calling us to go.