

8.30.26 Sermon on Matthew 17:1-8

As you may recall, last week, I called an audible and combined last week's and this week's lectionary reading together, which was Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Jesus' subsequent rebuke of Peter when he failed to understand what kind of Messiah Jesus was. That meant today, I had to choose something different. I decided to continue on in the next chapter of Matthew – this was actually a passage we read right back before the beginning of Lent – the story of the Transfiguration. We have a whole Sunday dedicated to it, where we focus on the transformation of Jesus in his dazzling white clothes up on the mountaintop. Today, we will revisit this story, with a little bit more of a focus on Moses and Elijah as well.

Usually, when we talk about this passage, we say that Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets, therefore, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. And that is certainly true. But I think there is more here, as well. I wonder if Matthew wants us to remember more than just their job descriptions. Moses and Elijah aren't just two great religious leaders from Israel's history. They are also two of the Bible's greatest challengers of kings. Both of them lived in worlds where political rulers claimed enormous power over human lives, encountering systems that concentrated wealth in the hands of a few, while using violence to preserve that power. Both of them stood before those rules and declared in one way or another, "You are not God." And now, they are the ones standing beside Jesus on that mountain. Today, we consider what that means.

To understand Moses, we have to understand Egypt. His story and the one of the Exodus is not a story that is just about one bad ruler with a bad personality. Pharaoh represents an entire system. He is at the top of the hierarchy, of an enormous structure of political, religious, military, and economic power, and at the bottom are the enslaved Hebrew people whose bodies are used to keep the whole thing running. At the beginning of Exodus, we learn that a new Pharaoh has arisen who does not remember Joseph, and has no regard for his descendants. He looks at all of the Hebrews and he becomes afraid. Notice Pharaoh's mindset here – he looks at a vulnerable minority and he sees a threat. He thinks, "These foreigners are becoming too numerous. They might become dangerous. They might side with our enemies. We have to do something about them." And once a population has been successfully deemed dangerous, it becomes much easier to justify cruelty. Sound familiar?

And so Pharaoh enslaves the Hebrews, but even slavery isn't enough. When the population continues to grow, Pharaoh increases their workload. And when that doesn't solve the problem, Pharaoh moves towards genocide. First, he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill the male children. When they evade Pharaoh's plans, he commands his soldiers to throw Hebrew boys into the Nile. Here we see this cycle of fear, exploitation, violence, and death, all because Pharaoh has convinced himself that the Hebrew people exist for the sake of Egypt and that their bodies belong to the empire. Their labor, their children, and their future belong to the empire.

But then God hears them – he hears the cries from the ones at the bottom. And God says, "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt." The Exodus begins because God hears the people Empire has decided are expendable. And so God sends Moses, who walks into Pharaoh's court, ready to challenge Pharaoh at every turn, saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go." Every plague strikes at the heart of the Egyptian empire, physically and symbolically.

But there is another part of Moses' story that is especially important, because God doesn't only liberate the Hebrews from Egypt, God, through Moses, also tries to teach the people of Israel how to not become Egypt. The people physically leave Pharaoh and Egypt behind, but they also have to leave its logic behind, so God gives them a different vision of society at Mt. Sinai.

Egypt proclaimed the myth that human beings existed in order to produce, but God gives them the sabbath. Work stops on the seventh day for everyone, not just wealthy land owners. Everyone rests. Kids, servants, immigrants, animals, and even the land itself would eventually rest. Imagine how radical that would have sounded to Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked the question of the Hebrews, "How many bricks did you make today?" while God tells people, "You are more than what you produce."

Egypt concentrated wealth in the hands of its most powerful, while in the covenant given through Moses at Mt. Sinai, Israel is commanded to leave part of the harvest for the poor and the immigrant. Israel's covenantal law places limits on accumulation and imagines the release of debts and the restoration of land (now whether that actually ever happened in practice is a different story). In Egypt, vulnerable people were turned into disposable labor, but in the new vision of life, Israel is commanded to care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger. Over and over again, as Moses delivers the law given by God, he says, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Do not forget what Pharaoh did to you – do not become Pharaoh!"

That is the anti-imperial legacy of Moses. Freedom isn't just escaping an oppressive rule, it is also refusing to reproduce that ruler's values once you have power yourself. Of course, in Israel's story, they do eventually end up doing exactly what God warned them not to do. They ask for a king. Later on, Samuel warns what kings will do: they will take your sons and daughters, they will take your fields and vineyards, they will take your livestock and wealth – and eventually Israel follows this path, which brings us to the next person we find on the mountain during Jesus' transfiguration: Elijah.

In Elijah's time, Israel has kings, and many of these kings have begun to behave a lot like Pharaoh did. Elijah comes onto the scene in the time of the divided monarchy during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel in the northern kingdom of Israel (as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah).

You may remember the story of Naboth's vineyard, where Ahab's imperial power and greed are on full display. Naboth owns a vineyard next to Ahab's palace, and Ahab wants it. He offers to buy it or exchange it for something else. Naboth refuses. The land is his ancestral inheritance, and besides that, in Israel's covenantal imagination, the land ultimately belongs to God and the king cannot simply decide that everything in his borders belongs to him. When Naboth says no, Ahab goes home angry. Jezebel fuels the fire of his anger and comes up with a plan to seize Naboth's land. She arranges for Naboth to be falsely accused. Witnesses lie, Naboth is condemned, put to death, and once that happens, Ahab takes the vineyard. Here we have political corruption at its finest. But it's also about something larger – it's about the concentration of political power, economic power, and religious power all working together so that the person at the top can take from the person at the bottom. Enter Elijah.

God says to Elijah, "Go down to meet King Ahab." He looks right at King Ahab and says, "You killed a man, and now you are also taking his property?" He stands beside the murdered Naboth and tells the king that God sees what has happened. That is the prophetic tradition to the core. Elijah is not Ahab's chaplain,

blessing his agenda, he stands outside the palace asking, “What happened to Naboth? Who paid the price for your prosperity? Whose labor built your wealth? Whose blood made this possible? Who became disposable so you could have what you wanted?”

Elijah insists that kings remain accountable to the same God as everyone else, and his resistance goes even deeper. His conflict with Ahab and Jezebel is also about Baal. Baal isn’t just a competing religious preference. Baal worship had become entangled with royal power. Ahab and Jezebel had joined political and religious authority together to reinforce one another. The political system gave legitimacy to the religious system, and the religious system gave legitimacy to the king.

Elijah refused to accept that. At the great showdown at Mt. Carmel, he confronts this arrangement, saying, “If the Lord is God, follow the Lord. If Baal is god, follow Baal.” He knew that you cannot just blend the worship of God with whatever system happens to protect the interests of those in power. Elijah understood something prophets have known throughout the centuries – when religion gets too close to empire, it stops challenging empire and starts blessing it. This is why Jezebel wants Elijah dead. Authoritarian power can tolerate religion quite well – but it cannot tolerate religion it cannot control.

And so we come back to Matthew 17 and the transfiguration. Jesus is standing on the mountain and suddenly Moses and Elijah appear. Think about everything these two figures carry with them. Moses carries the memory of enslaved people making bricks for Pharaoh, of their liberation, of the giving of a covenant that offered a different vision of the world than empire. Moses carries the warning, “You escaped Egypt, don’t become Egypt.”

Elijah carries Naboth’s vineyard, and the blood of a man killed just because a king wanted his land. Elijah carries the refusal to let political power and religious power merge into one unquestionable system, and he carries the prophetic conviction that rulers must be challenged when they exploit the vulnerable.

Standing between them is Jesus. Jesus stands in the same tradition – a tradition that Jesus also brings to completion. As you recall, last week, we heard Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, even though he misunderstands what that means. He still imagines a Messiah according to the world’s understanding of power – there will be victory and strength, triumph, the overthrowing of Rome, and maybe Israel finally getting its own king back. But Jesus says that he is going to Jerusalem and that he will suffer there. He will also be rejected and killed. Peter cannot accept that because Peter wants Jesus to defeat empire by becoming better at empire.

Jesus refuses. And six days later, Peter sees Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah. Moses challenged Pharaoh, Elijah challenged Ahab, and now Jesus reveals something even more radical: God’s answer to domination and empire is not a better ruler – it’s an entirely different understanding of power. Jesus doesn’t come to put a righteous person on Caesar’s throne. Jesus doesn’t just oppose bad rulers. He rejects the imperial definition of greatness itself.

In the transfiguration, God speaks, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well-pleased. Listen to him!”

Moses with his words and actions, says, “Pharaoh is not God.” Elijah with his words and actions says, “Ahab is not God.” But Jesus says, “Let me show you what God actually looks like.”

God looks like someone kneeling with a towel around his waist and like someone touching people everyone else calls unclean. God looks like someone feeding hungry people and welcoming children. God looks like someone sitting at tables with sinners. God looks like someone telling the rich to give to the poor and someone telling his followers to love their enemies. God looks like someone refusing to call down armies. God looks like someone carrying a cross.

And eventually Rome nails Jesus to that cross, because crucifixion is what empire does when someone refuses to submit to its power. Rome's cross attempts to say that Caesar decides who lives and who dies. But Easter declares that it does not.

That is where Jesus completes the story that begins with Moses and continues through Elijah. Moses confronts Pharaoh, Elijah confronts Ahab, and Jesus confronts the entire logic of domination. And he does something neither Pharaoh nor Ahab nor Caesar can understand. He refuses to become like them in order to defeat them. That makes the voice from the cloud extraordinarily important for Christians today: "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

We still live among Pharaohs and Ahab's. We still live in a world where vulnerable people can be described as threats so that cruelty toward them becomes acceptable. We still live in economic systems where human beings are often valued primarily by what they can produce. We still live in a world where extraordinary wealth can become extraordinary political power. We still live in a world where Naboth's vineyard can be taken because the people who want it have enough money, influence, or authority to take it. And we still face the temptation to merge religion with political power so that the altar blesses the palace and the palace protects the altar.

The temptation for Christians is always to imagine that everything would be fine if "our people" controlled the empire. If we could get "our" guy, "our" laws, "our" political power. Whatever our version of Caesar is. But Jesus does not invite his followers to seize Caesar's throne. He tells us to take up a cross, and there is a world of difference between those two things.

Let's not make the same mistake Peter does, and instead, pay attention to the voice of God, coming from the cloud that says of Jesus, "Listen to him." Listen to Jesus. Not Pharaoh or Ahab. Not Caesar or presidents. Not political parties or preachers who promise that domination can become holy if Christians are the ones doing it.

Listen to him. And what does he say? "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Love your enemies. Welcome the stranger. Feed the hungry. Forgive. Serve. Take up your cross. Follow me." Amen.