

Going Through Changes

February 23, 2020

Matthew 17:1-9

“No two people are alike.” This is a phrase often used to reassure people that, though their peers might think of them as weird (as mine definitely did), it’s not a bad thing. However, this phrase is only used to compare two separate persons. Another use for it: comparing one’s self now and how one was years ago. When I was eight, I was a troublemaker who loved to make fun of people, even at the expense of hurting their feelings. By the age of eighteen, I had turned those damaging words on myself and had become my own bully, creating trouble for my emotional well-being that has taken me years to stop doing and to fix. Now, at the age of almost 30, I’m married, not as damaging of myself with my words, and loving life as much as I did as a child. Three different points in my life with three different people/personas. The same is true for everyone else as well. Who we were as young children is not necessarily who we are now. For better or for worse, everyone changes.

More than just our persons though, our lives change, too. People are born and pass away. Jobs begin and end. Places of residence get bigger and smaller, and have varying decorations. People get married, and sometimes divorce. The list goes on, but suffice it to say, changes happen, to everyone and everything. For better or for worse, change is a part of life. “Change” is what I want to focus on today. “Change” is the theme of the reading from Matthew today.

Before we get to the Transfiguration itself, it is worth noting that a few verses earlier is the famous passage of Jesus asking his disciples “who do people say that I am? . . . But who do you say that I am?” To the first question, one of the answers given is “Elijah.” We see in 2 Kings Elijah is taken up into the Heavens on a “chariot of fire led by horses of fire.” At that point, it sparks a legend that Elijah’s ascent happened in this way because Elijah was going to return. So, already, people are viewing Jesus as Elijah reborn.

Another answer to that first question though is “one of the prophets.” Theologians believe that this answer of “one of the prophets” is actually in reference to one prophet in particular: Moses. Moses’ grave was not known to anyone then, and sparked a similar legend as what happened with Elijah. People believed Moses would return, some believing that Elijah was Moses reborn. So, in other words, people are thinking that Jesus is either Moses and/or Elijah reborn.

To the second question, “who do you say that I am,” the answer given is “the Messiah.” It needs to be noted though that, though they are right in saying that, who they believe the messiah to be is false. “Messiah” derives from the Hebrew word for “anointed one.” Many of the prophets and kings, just as human as you or me, were anointed. Therefore, there was an understand by people in that day and age that the messiah would be just your average human, however divinely inspired/gifted. Here then is where the Transfiguration, one of the greatest set of changes in the Bible, happens.

I say “set of changes” because the Transfiguration has more than one change. The most obvious change is Jesus’ appearance. His garments and his face begin to glow. In a certain

sense, Jesus, who has only been seen as wholly human, now physically displays his “wholly divine” side. This then causes the second change.

The second change is the disciples’ perception of Jesus. As I mentioned before, the disciples thought that Jesus was just your average human with some special gifts, nothing more. Now that Jesus’ divine side is open and apparent, quite literally shining in their faces, the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus is changes, and this perception/understanding is reinforced by two other things that happen. The first thing that happens as a reinforcement is the appearance of Elijah and Moses. All three are in the same place at the same time; therefore, there is an understanding that Jesus is neither Elijah reborn nor Moses reborn. Also though, the presence of Elijah (representative of the Prophets) and Moses (who delivered the Law to the people of God) displays that Jesus is the fulfillment of both the prophecies made by the prophets and the promises made by the Law. The second thing that happens as a reinforcement is the divine voice. At Jesus’ baptism, it says, “This is my Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” This time, it says the same thing, adding to it, “Listen to him.” God is claiming Jesus as being the only begotten child of God. With that declaration comes the reinforced understanding that Jesus, the fulfillment of the prophets and the law, is wholly God and wholly human, and therefore has not just authority, but *divine* authority. So, the disciples’ perceptions and understanding of Jesus also changes here.

The third and final change is the theme of Jesus’ ministry from this point. Two out of three predictions of his death happen after the Transfiguration. Jesus begins to tell of the end times more and more. We see more of the Pharisees, Saducees, and Herodeans trying to trap Jesus. Thinking of this in terms of a “plot graph,” those wonderful exercises from elementary English class, the mountaintop is the climax, the peak of Jesus ministry. Everything has been leading up to this point, this final revelation. Now, everything leads towards Jerusalem, towards Jesus’ fulfilling his destiny via the most excruciating and embarrassing of punishments. Suffice it to say, this is a story of change, and who better to exemplify that change, to bring it into being, than Jesus?

Jesus changed the world. Our salvation is no longer dependent on our actions, but on divine election. Our covenant is no longer entered by means of circumcision, but now by Baptism of the Spirit, which is represented by water. Our slavery to Sin has ended. All these changes and more have happened because of Jesus. If Jesus is willing to make the sacrifices he did to change the world like he did for all humanity (past, present, and future), we must ask ourselves: What changes are we willing to make to be more like Christ? Are we willing to work towards being more loving, compassionate, giving, and/or self-sacrificial of time and energy? What changes are we willing to make to change the world for the better? Are we willing to do something like speak up for those who don’t have a voice? Are we willing to do something as hard-fought as, in the wake of a mass shooting, writing our senators and representatives until such awful occurrences as Aurora, Parkland, Orland, and countless others are prevented from happening again? Could it be as simple as putting more in the offering plate so that the Church Universal can do more for humanity as a whole?

As I said at the beginning, who we once were is not who we necessarily are now or even can be, and who we can be could make all the difference in making this world a better place.

The world changed because of the words and actions of one man, Jesus. If we are to follow in Christ's footsteps, we are therein challenged to change the world for the better, for all persons living and yet to come. So, in closing, I ask you: How is God using you to change the world for the better, and what changes does God want you to make or *can* you make so that God's intent will be achieved?