

## **Starting at the End**

February 19, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9

“Every ending is a new beginning.” This is a sentence towards which I, as a pastor, have come to have a certain level of dislike. I say this not because it is false in any way, but rather because the context that it and similar phrases, like “When one door closes, another door opens,” are used is debatably inappropriate. Often, these are heard when someone has lost a job, a loved one, or experienced some other sort of loss. They are grieving that loss, and while these sentences are used as a means of reassurance that “all will be well,” they also deny that person who is grieving appropriate space to grieve. It denies the validity of their feelings and unintentionally shames them for those feelings. That said, I also have a certain level of appreciation for this and similar sentences when they are properly used, as in the context of today’s story, a story where the veritable “ends” and “beginnings” connect in a single, magnanimous moment.

Up to this point, Jesus and his disciples have been walking all around Israel and Judah, healing and teaching how things ought to be, how people ought to act, etc. Now, that ministry comes to a decisive end. Jesus’ ministry from this point forward will be pointedly towards the future, both in the sense of Jesus’ fate on the Cross and the world’s imminent fate at the end of days as presented to John of Patmos. Two of Jesus’ three predictions of his death will take place after he, Peter, and John have descended the mountain, as will public descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. What’s more, from this point, he will interact with and more openly criticize the religious elite, those who will lead the crowd in calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. All these predictions and events that will truly stir the pot will take place after this single moment in today’s reading. That said, what’s truly incredible about this singular moment where this all happens though is what actually happens, both on the surface and the deeper meanings behind them.

For example, in hearing this story, we are quick to focus on Jesus’ physical changes. His garments and face are glowing brighter than bright and whiter than white. A simple explanation of this event is that those present see Jesus’ fully divine nature as opposed to his fully human nature. However, what’s happening is more than just that. Up to this point, the disciples have seen Jesus for his wholly human nature, nothing more. Peter proclaims just before this scene that Jesus is the Messiah without fully grasping what this word means, what lies in store for Jesus as the Messiah. In this moment, the disciples don’t just see him as he is, seeing his divine nature for what it is, but rather they see Jesus as he will be. They see not the Jesus that is but the Jesus that will be. The resurrected, ascended, and eternally-bright Son from the book of Revelation. The disciples are in all truth being given here a foretaste of what humanity is to behold at the end of time. Hence the reason it is happening on a mountaintop in a great cloud and only to two of the twelve. What they are witnessing is something separate from the temporal world, something we cannot fathom or begin to understand. However, this is happening not before all the disciples, but a select few, an indication that this sight is something that not everyone will witness. However, the revelation to the disciples on the mountaintop doesn’t stop there.

With this revelation in Jesus’ transfigured appearance comes a new understanding of who and what Jesus is. Jesus is not just human, but God incarnate. What’s more, even with that

power and authority to prevent what Jesus has just predicted will happen, Jesus must be handed over and killed. Despite what he is, he cannot escape the calling he has been given, just as they and we cannot escape our callings, despite how hard and potentially isolating those calls might be. This revelatory understanding is then reinforced by two other occurrences. The first is the appearance of Moses and Elijah. On the one hand, Moses is representative of the Law, indicating that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, of that which has carried the Israelite people forward up to this point. On the other, Elijah is representative of the Prophets, of those that filled the hearts of the Israelites and Judeans with hope for better things to come, a hope that thus is carried forward through Jesus, his teachings, and his sacrifice. The other occurrence is the divine voice that we first witness at Jesus' baptism. At his baptism, only Jesus witnesses the dove and hears the divine voice. Now, his disciples are witnesses to this voice, which adds to its previous message three words: "Listen to him."

Then again, why wouldn't we? Jesus, a single man, changed the world. Through him, our salvation's dependency on our actions has ended, and a new salvation by grace has begun in its place. Our slavery to Sin has ended, and our freedom found in the reassurance of our having been made clean has begun. All these changes and more have happened because of Jesus. The old life has ended, and the new life has begun. However, it bears to question: If we must listen to Jesus as the divine voice says, and Jesus is willing to make the sacrifices he did to change the world like he did, what changes are we willing to make to be more like Christ? In other words, in what ways are we willing to put an end to one reality that a new reality might begin in its place? Are we willing to work towards being more loving, compassionate, giving, and/or self-sacrificial of time and energy? Are we willing to speak up for those who have no voice? 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?

Regardless of what change we want or need to make, we have been called to be change agents, just as Jesus was a change agent; to put to end older practices that do not meet God's calling to humanity and to start new practices that are, for lack of a better word, more "Christian." Our old lives of powerlessness to affect the world have ended, and we have new lives through Christ, lives that we are subsequently charged to be used to affect change as Christ did. So, in closing, I ask you: What ending will you bring about so that something else might have its beginning?