

Steps Achieved

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Matthew 17:1-9

“Every step is an achievement.” This is a line from Eugene Peterson’s memoir “The Pastor,” a book detailing his experiences, trials, failures, and successes during his time as an ordained pastor. What he is driving at with this line, one that he introduces from the get-go in his memoir, is that nothing is without its purpose and there are victories to be celebrated in every circumstance. As much as we celebrate graduations, promotions, marriages, and other major events in life, those “epic conclusions” to various chapters of life, the smaller victories within those chapters leading up to them (dean’s lists, honor rolls, successful interviews, making it past the first three months of dating) are also to be celebrated. In a similar fashion, it’s not just the positive events that are to be celebrated, but the overcoming, learning from, and persevering through those trials and tribulations that we all face at various times and to various degrees. This is no less true for Jesus, his ministry, and today’s story.

While today’s passage is the traditional reading for Transfiguration Sunday, which we celebrated two weeks ago, this passage is also important when looked at from the context of perseverance. We are traveling with Jesus these 40 days to the Cross. Just as his eyes are on the Cross that is both far off and fast approaching, so too are we looking to Holy Week and Easter Sunday, knowing that it is coming but has not yet arrived. Thus, in the meantime, we travel with Jesus, learning from him as we go along, facing temptations of our own from those things we’ve given up just as Jesus was tempted. As we discussed last week, Jesus succeeded against the Devil’s testing him on a mountaintop at the beginning of his ministry, and just as that victory is celebrated every year, so too do we succeed each time we face temptation and resist, something to celebrate in our own lives. There’s more to it than just this, though.

Consider for a moment Jesus’ ministry journey thus far. It begins with Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan. He comes up, the heavens split open, the Spirit alighting itself on Jesus as the divine voice, which only Jesus can hear in this instance, proclaims, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I’m well pleased.” Then, Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness where, at the end, the Devil tests him, prefacing two of his three tests with the line “If you are the Son of God.” In other words, the Devil is tempting Jesus to doubt his title by feeling he needs to prove it or deny it by giving into the Devil’s temptations. So, not only does Jesus not give into testing God, being self-sustaining, and seeking after power, but he resists, all the while, feeling he needs to prove he is the Son of God, finding assurance rather in God’s words and the divine voice alone.

Now we get to today’s reading, where the divine voice proclaims that same message, this time to James, John, and Peter. So, the divine voice proclaims Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus maintains that he is the Son of God, and now the disciples are not only told he is the Son of God, but shown he is. They see Jesus as no one has seen him before. They see him not as he is now, but as he will be. Jesus has just told them the Son of God must be arrested, handed over, and killed that he may rise on the third day. When they go down the mountain, Jesus will give the second of three predictions of his being arrested, killed, and risen. So, Jesus has affirmed his being the Son of God in all his glory, and that glory is sandwiched between two predictions of

trial, suffering, tribulation, whatever word you choose, as if to say that his ultimate glory, his final victory on that third day is inseparable from the pain he must endure along the way. Every step thus far has led to this point, and every step along the way after this point, difficult though it may be, is necessary, an achievement in working towards and achieving that final victory. However, this episode is not just a step in Jesus' personal journey, but coincidentally is also a step in a far longer journey.

Let us not forget that Jesus and his disciples are not alone on this mountaintop, this place of divine revelation throughout the Bible. Jesus is supposedly conversing with Moses and Elijah, two very specific figures in the greater biblical narrative. On the one hand, Moses is what biblical scholars refer to as the "messianic prototype." He was the first one called by God for the divine task of saving Their flock. So, Moses leads the tribes of Israel out of enslavement into the wilderness where God reveals Themselves to Moses many times on the mountaintop. Then, when the tribes reach the Promised Land, Moses is not forbidden to enter. The Bible tells us that Moses views it from a mountaintop and that Moses' tomb is known to no human. There is a belief system that states Moses didn't die; that, after the tribes crossed over the Jordan, a cloud surrounded Moses on that same mountaintop and took him away. Fast forward a few hundred years then to Elijah, the "messianic prophet" who was charged, like Jesus and Moses, to save God's people, this time from their own waywardness and sins. Like Moses and Jesus, he also does not die. Instead, a chariot of fire swoops down from Heaven and takes him to final glory, body and all. So, too, will this be the case for Jesus. He will not only be raised in spirit, but in body. There will be no body left in a tomb, as it has gone to final glory in its entirety, just as is the case for Moses and Elijah. So, Jesus, then, according to biblical scholars, is the perfection of this messianic tradition that started with Moses, saw refinement in Elijah, and now sees perfection in Jesus.

In the end, the point that Matthew is aiming towards by telling this story how and where he does is as a means of inspiring hope. Just as God worked through Moses and Elijah, They work through Jesus as well. Therefore, there is hope that, despite the trials the world faces, God will continue to interact with the world and work through Their flock, including all of us. Additionally, just as the final glory for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus came after pain, torment, hardship, so too will this be the case for all of us. Those trials that we face along the way, be they resisting the urge to let our Lenten Fasting slide, making necessary changes or adjustments to our lifestyles, making hard decisions for the care of loved ones, or whatever they may be, facing those hardships, persevering through them, overcoming them, remaining strong in the faith all the while, these are all smaller achievements in a greater narrative. Very truly, "every step is an achievement." So, I ask: What steps have you achieved lately?