

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 17:1-9

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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John
and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun,
and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.
Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here;
if you wish, I will make three dwellings here,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a
voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved,
with him I am well pleased.
Listen to him!"

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.
But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
"Get up and do not be afraid."

And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.
As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them,
"Tell no one about the vision
until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This story has five episodes. The first episode of the transfiguration story has the feeling of going up a high mountain. A suggestion is that you imagine yourself climbing a high mountain throughout the sentence. In the traditions of Israel, this mountain climbing expedition recalls Moses and Elijah climbing up Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19.20; 34.4-5; I Kings 19.8-9). Matthew's audience would probably have inferred that the mountain they climbed was Mt. Hermon. Matthew (also Mark) locates the previous story of the Messianic confession and Jesus' discourse about discipleship at Caesarea Philippi over which Mt. Hermon (9000 feet) towers. And Mt. Hermon is the only major mountain in the region. If Jesus went up a mountain from Caesarea Philippi, Mt. Hermon is the most logical place. (Google Earth has a good map of the area.)

The transfiguration is a vision of Jesus as one who is glorified. The challenge in telling this story is to convey that sense of glory. The description of Jesus' superwhite clothes can be told with a sense of awe and wonder. Likewise the appearance of both Moses and Elijah is unprecedented in the storytelling traditions of Israel and is amazing for Matthew's listeners. The context of this glorification is Jesus' passion prophecy with its associations of shame and humiliation.

The verbal thread of Moses and Elijah links the parts of the second episode together; first "there appeared Moses and Elijah" and then Peter says "one for Moses and one for Elijah." Another interpretive matter in the telling of this episode is the performance of Peter's words. Mark explains after Peter's words that "he said this because he was afraid," which explains to the audience why Peter's words were spoken in a bumbling and fearful manner. Matthew has no such explanation. This may imply that Matthew told this episode with a little more dignity for Peter since Jesus stated just before this episode "on this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16.18). Once again, the interpretation of this is something you can decide. A humorous note is not out of the question but that is a judgment that storytellers have to make for themselves.

The translation of Peter's offer as three "dwellings"(NRSV) is an awkward and misleading translation. This English word implies that Peter was offering to build three houses. The RSV translation, "booths," is more historically accurate but makes no sense to most people now. The Greek word, *skanas*, referred to a tent or a temporary dwelling like those built for the festival of booths. It is the Greek word that is used in the Septuagint for the tabernacle or "tent of testimony" in which Moses met God (Ex. 27.21; 29.4; Num. 1.1). In my opinion, "tents" is the best available English word for the Greek word here.

The words of God here are often told in a big authoritative deep voice, THIS IS MY SON, etc. I don't think that's how God sounded in the stories. It's more like the voice of God who spoke to Elijah in the silence. God's voice here is intimate and peaceful. However, as the fearful response of the disciples indicates, there is a dimension of power to God's voice that is intimidating.

The words of Jesus are unambiguously comforting. They are the words of a leader who is in charge of the situation: "Get up, don't be afraid."

This story is an epiphany. It is an experience of God's presence and of the transformation of our perception of Jesus. This story is the first major indication of Jesus' glory. The prophecy about crucifixion and death with its associations of shame and degradation is then immediately followed by this vision of Jesus' glory. It is like the Philippians hymn: "he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross; therefore God has highly exalted him" (Phil 2.8-9) This is a highly exalted story. That glory and exaltation needs to be conveyed in the spirit of the telling of this story.