

Date: June 3-4, 2023

Title: *Asking for a Friend - Who is Jesus?*

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-13

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We started a series a couple of weeks ago that we called *Asking for a Friend*. And we're looking at the seven times that Peter interacted with Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. And he didn't always ask a question. Sometimes he said something that was a bit impetuous, or maybe he challenged Jesus on something, or he said something that maybe others of us would think if we were in the situation. And in a way, all of them became like a question that you might not want to ask, but you might want to ask for a friend.

Today, we're going to look at what's known as the transfiguration. You just heard this read in Matthew 17. And just for the sake of transparency, this has been a passage that I've read over the years and has never fully moved me. It's one of these things we read and you're thinking, well, Jesus turned into this, this other kind of translucent being, maybe. And he had white robes and the disciples thought it was Moses or a lion. What is this about? And so, that has at least been one of my reactions

Now, I've taught on this over the years. It's not like I've never taught on this passage. But over the last couple of weeks, as I was preparing for today, I think I see this passage with a little more clarity, and I hope that that will be true for all of us today as we just look at this. But before we jump into that directly, let me start with this, and that is, how do you experience or think that you can experience what's beyond this world?

Now, that may not sound like much of a question, but it's a question that's actually in our cultural mindset. And here's why I say this. If you scroll through whatever streaming service you have, chances are there are several shows that are either in your queue or are available to you that deal with how you can go beyond this life, how you can experience life beyond the realm of this exact world. And if you've watched movies, it's a theme that recurs in movies. Go all the way back to Star Wars and make your travel beyond, or the Guardians of the Galaxy, even the most recent. It's the idea of there's something else out there that you can interact with.

I looked at a list of books that one person had put together. So, these are the top nonfiction books of all time, and four of the top 25 were about encountering God or encountering life beyond this earth. And undoubtedly, some of us here have had that experience. Some of us know people who have that kind of experience on a regular basis. And today, we see a time that the veil, so to speak, was pulled back when Jesus really revealed part of who he is. And this is, as I said, the transfiguration. It's told in Luke and in Mark as well.

Here's what it says in verse one of chapter 17 of Matthew. "After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." Now, why does he lead them up on this mountain, what mountain, and what's the significance of this? Some have assumed that this was Mount Hermon, which is the tallest mountain in Israel. Some have said Mount Tabor which would have been more geographically appropriate. And I don't think the point is what mountain as much as Jesus was taking some of his disciples, three of his disciples, up on a mountain. And he was, in a way, reenacting what happened on Mount Sinai when Moses went up and received the Ten Commandments as if to say, I want to show you how God is moving today.

And then it says this. "There he was transfigured before them." The word transfigured in the original language means literally to be changed from kind of one form to another. "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus." So, here's the scene. Three disciples go with Jesus up on this mountain. And as they're there, Jesus has this moment where all of a sudden, they say, this is a little different, and then Moses and Elijah show up.

I don't know about you, but I would be having a moment if that had happened to me. And this is why this has always felt a little off to me because you say, really, this is like what is happening here and all of a sudden, Peter responds and he says, oh, okay, Jesus, why don't I make three tents? One for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for you. And this will be a commemoration of this moment. I'm having a cool moment here, Jesus. Let me commemorate it, so to speak.

Now, most people, most commentators who write books on these things say that Moses here represents the law in Elijah, the prophets. And so, this is a moment of saying, here's the law, here are the prophets, and now Jesus is here. And it's almost like Peter gets it and he says, oh, okay, you're one of the great religious leaders of all time. I want to construct a tent as we might in the Kingdom someday to commemorate you, Jesus.

Now, we don't know all that's in His mind, but right when that happens, here's what happens next. "While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" So now, not only have they had this encounter with Moses and Elijah showing up, but now there's a cloud and a voice. And here's what happens then. "When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus." So, what's happening here? Well, what's happening is Jesus is being revealed to his disciples as God, as the Son of God. The veil is being pulled back that often exists between this world and the world beyond, and we're getting a glimpse into the glory of Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you, but sometimes when I read this, I think, well, that's nice that they had that experience, but it seems remote to me in my life and where I live. And so, the question in a way that Peter is asking here is who is Jesus? He's asking it not directly, but indirectly by saying, oh, I get it, you're a great religious leader. But then the response of saying, this is my son and whom I'm well pleased is saying, no, no, you can't just make Jesus a good religious leader. He's more than that. He is God. And this is the way that you have a connection to what's beyond this life. And so, the question today in some ways is who is Jesus? And then how do you know that you have an encounter with him? And this is a key question whether you've been around the church a long time or you're new to church or you're trying to decide if church is for you. Who is Jesus matters immensely.

There are a lot of different opinions about who Jesus is. One opinion is just to say Jesus is a great religious leader. This could be what Peter was hinting at. He's a great example. He's a great teacher. He's a prophet. He's somebody who points the way. But he isn't God himself. But I don't believe that option is open to us. And I'll read a quote from C.S. Lewis in just a moment. But C.S. Lewis popularized a generation ago, more than a generation ago, this idea that Jesus can't just be a good teacher. He can't be a good example. And the reason he said this is because Jesus claimed to be God. This is one of these places where the Scriptures show that Jesus had a claim to the deity. He can't be a good teacher. And the reason that doesn't work is that if he was a good teacher and he claimed to be God and he wasn't, then it doesn't hold that he's a good prophet, a good example, and a good teacher. In other words, he has to either have believed he was God and not be God, which would make him crazy.

Maybe you've met some people like this, but this is the person who says you know what, I think that I'm God and I'm not. And this would have made him crazy or he was lying. He knew he wasn't God, but he claimed to be God. Maybe he said I'm tired of the carpenter thing. It's a hard life, so I'm going to go with the God thing. But whatever it was, he had to either be crazy, lying, or ultimately the Son of God. But he can't be a good teacher.

Here's how C.S. Lewis wrote about this. He said, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher, he would be either a lunatic on the level of a man who says he's a poached egg or he would be the devil of how you must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him. You can kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him the Lord God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us, and he has not intended to."

One of the things that this transfiguration moment does is it forces us to say either Jesus is God, the Son of God or he's not, and there's no middle ground. A lot of times what people in our culture want to do is they want to create Jesus in our own image. Here are a few of the ways people have spoken about Jesus over the years.

Thomas Jefferson said Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the Son of God. Prince Philip said Jesus might be described as an underprivileged, working-class victim of political and religious persecution. Fidel Castro said I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol of that extraordinary figure Jesus Christ. Mikhail Gorbachev said Jesus was the first socialist, the first to seek a better life for mankind. Malcolm X said Christ wasn't white, Christ was black. The poor brainwashed black person has been made to believe that Christ was white to maneuver him into worshiping white man, a white Jesus, a white virgin, white angels, white everything but a black devil. Martin Luther King Jr. said Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness. Rollo May, who was an American existential psychologist, said Christ is the therapist for all humanity. And one Native American legend called Jesus the buffalo calf of God.

Now, the reason I read those to you is because something happens for many people when they come to Jesus, and that is they in many ways create Jesus in their own image. In fact, this is what Romans one tells us will happen, is that we will exchange a truth about God for a lie, and we'll make God basically into our image. And with Jesus, this happens all the time. And so, what a lot of people do is they'll say Jesus is the great socialist, he's the great therapist, he's the great whatever, and we craft Jesus into the image that we have of what God is, rather than taking God as He is, as He's revealed to be.

And what the transfiguration shows us in many ways is that Jesus transcends the law and the prophets. And when I say he transcends, what I mean is he fulfills them. The law revealed that God is holy and has a way that things should be, and Jesus fulfills the law because none of us can. And He transcends the prophets because He reveals Jesus or God perfectly. Hebrews one says that Jesus is the exact representation of God and that when we think about God, the safest way to think about God is to think about Jesus.

Luke 24 verse 44 Jesus says this, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." In other words, I fulfilled the law. But the other thing that Jesus does is He is the reliable way that you can know what's beyond the veil, what's beyond this world.

Every couple of years there's a book that comes out. Somebody writes a book about their near-death experience and how they've seen what's on the other side. And the books usually go something like somebody has a near-death experience, and they say they saw a great light. And then when they got up to the edge of the light, there was grandpa or grandma with their arms open on the other side and their dog, and they were fishing, and they were waiting for them. And everyone on the other side is happy. And then they were sucked back to this life.

And here's my point. You don't need to read those books to know what's on the other side because it's not reliable. What's reliable is what Jesus has revealed about what's on the other side, and the transfiguration shows us that Jesus is that reliable source. Now, I mentioned that I struggle a little bit with this passage, and one of the reasons I struggle with it is I've had this thought and that is, well, if God is real, why doesn't he just show himself a little more clearly rather than in these like peekaboo veiling unveiling kind of moments? Does anybody else ever have this thought? And what happens sometimes is that you have this thought, and you think, well, if God would just show himself to me, then I would believe. But is that true?

I mentioned that this is a reenactment of when Moses went up on Mount Sinai, and it's a little bit of Jesus saying, I want to reveal myself as now the full revelation of what was in part then. Do you know what happened right before Moses went up to Mount Sinai? Do you know what the children of Israel experienced? They left Egypt through miracles, and then they walked through the Red Sea on dry land. So, here is the water part, and two million people walk through the Red Sea and then the people who pursue them go in and get tumbled by the water. And then when they get out on the other side, there's manna to sustain them, and then they had the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. The pillar of cloud by day. The pillar of fire by night.

Here's my point. If ever there were people who could say God probably is real, it was the people who could say, there was manna for me. This morning outside my tent, there's a pillar of cloud and fire to lead the way, and we have this miracle that we remember right back over here. Do you know what happened when Moses went up on the mountain? Do any of you remember your Bible story here? Moses goes on the mountain and the people start to have this revelry. Moses is coming down with the Ten Commandments revelation of God and he hears this revelry in the camp. And what it is, is that the people had decided that since Moses wasn't there, they were going to make a golden calf. And so, they take their gold. And then there's a humorous portion where Aaron, who was in charge when Moses was on the mountain, says, I don't know, I just threw the gold into the fire and out came this calf. I don't know how it happened. But the people started to worship this golden calf instead of the God that they had just seen.

And here's the point. You and I may think, well, if God would give me a moment, then I would believe more. It's probably not true, because our hearts are hardwired in some ways to doubt. And yet, God does reveal himself sometimes in deep experiences that you and I can have. And Jesus is the only reliable source of saying what's on the other side. So how do you know if you've had an experience? But by the way, sometimes I think God gives experiences, and then doesn't give experiences in short order. Have you ever prayed, God I just need a sign. I need to know you're real and then felt like God did something.

Imagine a kid going into his or her backyard and praying and saying, God, I just need to know you're real. And all of a sudden, a shooting star comes. And the kid says, oh, I know

God is real. Now I saw it. I believe it. I know it. Well, what happens the next night? The same kid goes out in his or her backyard and says, God, I just need to know you're real. Would you send me a shooting star again? And what happens is nothing. I don't think that's God being capricious. I think that's God just simply saying I will not be commanded and will not have you demand that I show you signs whenever you feel like it.

And genuine faith is in Jesus, not in a sign. And yet God sometimes graciously gives us a moment when we say the veil is pulled back, and I've sensed, and I've seen, and I've experienced the God of the universe. So how do we know when we're experiencing the God of the universe versus not? There are probably a lot of ways that we could talk about this. In this passage, there are at least four ways that we see evidence that this was a genuine encounter with the God of the universe.

The first is this, and that is it says this in verse six. "When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground." Falling face down to the ground in that culture was a sign of worship. One of the ways that you know you're encountering God is that your heart is filled with spontaneous wonder, awe, and worship of God. But it isn't just that. It's also that we are terrified because it says that they heard this, and they fell face down to the ground and they were terrified. One of the ways that you know that you're encountering God for real is that it isn't just a warm feeling where you say everything's awesome, but you have a moment of saying, this is a holy God who demands from me rightly, and he is God and I am not.

But then there's an assurance that comes simultaneously. Get up, Jesus said. Don't be afraid. So, Jesus doesn't just leave them terrified, but he gives them assurance. And so, an encounter with God has this genuine sense of wonder and spontaneous wonder, and it has a moment of being terrified. It has a moment of assurance. And then there's this as well. And I think this is in verse five where it says, this is my son whom I love, with him I'm well pleased. Then he says, what? Listen to him. One of the indicators that you're encountering God and not just a version of God that's in your own mind is that there's a deference to this God and a conforming of your will to his.

R.C. Sproul wrote a piece years ago that he called the *Psychology of Atheism*, and he explored Romans one, which is a passage about being given over to the desires of your heart. And he said the reason that atheists don't believe is rarely intellectual. He said it's usually psychological, meaning that it isn't that they don't have the evidence. And he pointed to Romans one that said people are without excuse because God has revealed himself in nature. It's because they don't like the implications of what a God means in their lives. One of the reasons that we're agnostic or atheist isn't because we've examined all the evidence and said there must not be a god. It's because we don't want there to be a God who's in charge of our lives.

And one of the ways you know you've actually encountered God, not a figment of your imagination, is there's a willingness to say, God, I will listen to your son, Jesus. I will do what Jesus has asked us to do rather than what I've chosen to do. Now, those moments come in a variety of ways and places, and what I want to do is just ask this question. And that is how do you put yourself in a place where you can experience that moment where belief in Jesus isn't just an intellectual, I read about it in the Bible and I have it, but I've felt the veil in some ways pulled back for a moment in my own life?

And so let me just suggest a couple of things. The first, I'm just going to say is to live with a sense of awareness rather than a big moment chasing mindset. Okay, now here's what I mean. Big moment chasing is when we basically say, I need to have God pull back the veil, I need the shooting star, I need the moment. And so, God, would you give me this moment? And we try to get God to give us a moment so that we feel a sense of His presence rather than being aware in the moment.

There was a movie that came out years ago. It was called Groundhog Day. It was Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell. And in the movie, they get stuck in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania on Groundhog Day, and they have to live the same day over and over and over again until Bill Murray gets it right. And what happens in the movie is Bill Murray starts to fall in love with Andie MacDowell. And of course, they didn't like each other at first. And every day he gets to a point and then they restart the day when something goes wrong in the romance. And then finally it gets to the point where she starts to fall for him, and they have a moment and kiss. And then what happens is he tries to fast forward through all the moments that led up to it because he's trying to hurry up and get to the kiss because he just wants to fast forward.

So, they had a little snowball fight in the movie. He tries to recreate the snowball fight and she's just annoyed the next day instead of moved by the romance of it. And what we'll try to do is we try to say, well, since God showed up this way last time, I'm going to do something that will be the same so that God shows up for me this time. You know, this is you went for a walk in the woods, and you had a moment where you sense God and you say, well, I'm going to go for a walk in the same woods to the same spot and expect God to show up the same way.

Usually, on a weekend, Orchard Hill has nine different worship gatherings. I'm usually personally in three of them Saturday night, two on Sunday. And what happens sometimes is I'll come here on Saturday night, and I'll sing and worship in the songs. And sometimes there will be a moment where I sense the wonder of God's spontaneous wonder. I'll have a little moment of terror, a moment of assurance, a moment of God, and I'm going to surrender my life again and afresh to you. And then I'll come back on Sunday morning. Same song, same band, same music, same lights. I'll even close my eyes the same way and be like, alright, here comes the moment. And it doesn't always happen.

And here's my point. When we start to demand that God meets us in a certain way, rather than being aware of where God actually wants to meet us, what happens is we're big moment chasing rather than being aware of his presence. And sometimes even when you go through the same service three different times, you hear the same teaching, you sing the same songs, God may want to tap into your moment and remove the veil in a different place. And sometimes it may just be that it doesn't even feel like it will happen for weeks.

And that leads me to a second thing, and that is it's important that we continue to be where Jesus is. Because sometimes you won't feel like you're encountering God but what we need to do is keep putting ourselves into the Scriptures, into worship, into teaching, into community, into nature, and I say nature because God does reveal himself in nature. Romans one says it and Psalm 19. Have you ever heard somebody say, I feel closer to God when I'm out on the boat fishing than in church? It's not entirely crazy. It's kind of biblical, but it doesn't mean that you don't go to church. What it means is that you say yes, God reveals himself in nature, and he also reveals himself in church. God also reveals himself in solitude.

In fact, in Matthew 14, which was the first passage we looked at when Jesus went away from the disciples, He went up on a mountain and twice the text says that he did it to be alone or to be isolated. And the idea is that sometimes the way that we encounter God is when we withdraw from all of the other activities of our lives. And one of the reasons some of us don't encounter God is because every time we're by ourselves, we turn something on so that we don't have to be alone with our thoughts. And we listen to music or podcasts or TV or something so that we're constantly hearing voices and we don't have to be alone. But sometimes God doesn't speak until we're in solitude. And so, we need to be where God is, in church, in Scripture, in worship, in community, in serving, in solitude, and in nature.

Well, let me tell you a story, and I'm not sure this works. And I didn't get a lot of feedback after the last two services. So, who knows? But I'm going to do it anyway. Let me start this way. When my kids started to go to college, one of the things I decided that they should do is have some hard experiences. That we shouldn't make it too cushy on them. And so, one of the things we did is when they were in school, as we said, if you want to come home, you have to take Megabus.

Does anybody know Megabus here? If you're in this region, they're big buses that have fares starting at \$1, and you can't usually get it for a dollar, but it's a cheap mode of transportation and it's somewhat unreliable. But I thought that it would be a good thing for my kids to have to navigate something like Megabus just to show that they could handle the world. By the way, my wife and I disagreed about this strategy.

And so, one of my sons was at school in Chicago, and it was spring break time, maybe a little before that, and I said do you want to come home Megabus? And so, he gets on the train. He goes downtown Chicago. Now, Megabus here in Pittsburgh has a place in the bus depot

where you can go into the bus depot. In Chicago evidently, they're not set up to be in the bus depot. So, the pickup point is outside the bus depot on a street corner in the middle of Chicago. So, my son gets there, and he shows up when he's supposed to. It's February, it's two degrees outside and he gets there and the Megabus doesn't show up and he's trying to find out what's going on. There's no customer service. There's nowhere to go. He texts me and I had that moment where it's like, I guess this was the experience I was going for, for him. And so, I try to call the Megabus and get them on the phone, and customer service and Megabus are kind of like an oxymoron.

I finally figured out what was going on. The bus had been delayed and it was going to be there supposedly in 3 hours. But here is the deal. He couldn't leave very far because whenever the bus showed up, the bus showed up. And whoever was there got on the bus and whoever wasn't there didn't get on the bus. So, on a two-degree day in the middle of February, he's standing on a street corner waiting for Megabus to show up. Now, on the other end, I decided that what I was going to do is take my other sons, and we're going to go to Cleveland because there's not a direct Megabus route from Pittsburgh to Chicago, Chicago to Pittsburgh, but they'd go to Cleveland. And so, I said, okay, I'll go to Cleveland, and we went to a Cavs game. We said he should be there right when it's done, and we'll pick him up and bring him home. Well, now we spend hours waiting at an appointed place in Cleveland in the middle of the night for Megabus to show up.

Okay, now you're probably saying, okay, you're right. This doesn't work. Here's my point. In some ways, experiencing God is like waiting for Megabus. Now, in some ways, it's not at all like that. Megabus is unreliable. It doesn't always come through Megabus. It's got all kinds of issues and here's why. It's like it, though. If you and I get tired of waiting for God to show up and remove the veil, what happens is we leave the appointed spot where Jesus is and we say, you know what, I haven't encountered Jesus in a while. Maybe Jesus isn't there. And we go about our way, and we don't know when He will actually show up. And we'll actually have a moment of experiencing the veil being removed from our eyes and saying, that is God where we're moved to wonder or moved to terror, to assurance and to a sense of surrender. What we need to do is keep being in the place where Jesus is and when he shows up, then those things happen in our lives.

But sometimes we just get tired of waiting and we say, this isn't worth it. The teaching hasn't done much for me lately. Oh, the worship, we just sing the same songs over and over again. I read my Bible all last week and I didn't have a single moment that it really jumped at me. I've been in the same small group for years and it's the same stories from the same people. I was out watching a sunset, and I was just so hurried that I didn't even sense the wonder of God. And so, we stop going. But when we put ourselves in a sense of anticipation and say I'm going to wait, and whether God shows up in the way that I expect him to or not, I'm going to be aware of his presence. And I'm going to look beyond even this moment to what Jesus has already revealed about himself, that He is God, that He is certain, whether I have an

experience or not. But when I have the experience, I will allow it to hearten me toward the goals. And when that's true, what happens is we encounter God, and it begins to change us.

Here's how A.W. Tozer wrote about this years ago. Speaking about God, he said, "He's revealed himself to some extent in nature, but more perfectly in the incarnation, meaning in the way that Jesus came to this earth. Now he waits to show himself in ravishing fullness to the humble soul and the pure in heart. The world is perishing for lack of knowledge of God, and the Church is famishing for want of His presence. The instant cure of most of our religious ills would be to enter the presence in spiritual experience, to become suddenly aware that we are in God and that God is in us. This would lift us out of our pitiful narrowness and cause our hearts to be enlarged. This would burn away the impurities from our lives."

See, faith isn't intended to only be an intellectual ascent. There's an intellectual aspect. It's intellectually satisfying. But genuine faith also means that sometimes we encounter God and that moves us to wonder, to terror, it moves us to assurance, and to surrender. And when those moments come, they propel us forward for the dark times when it feels like the moments don't come. And so, the transfiguration teaches us who Jesus is and what removes the veil so that we can say, I know with certainty that there's something beyond this life, and I can have hope that this world isn't everything.

Let's pray together. God, we ask today that you would help us not to get stuck on just keeping the law, but we would come to your son, Jesus, who's fulfilled the law and made a way for us to move past the veil, and that in that you would make our hearts overflow with wonder, with assurance, and surrender to who you are. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.