

Only Jesus

Sermon for the Last Sunday in Epiphany

Sermon Text: Matthew 17:1-8



And after six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If You wish, I will make three tents here, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.” ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

During the season of Epiphany, we always sing the versicle: Great is the mystery of faith, Hallelujah – God is revealed in human flesh, Hallelujah. Usually, the word mystery or secret means that something is not revealed to our eyes. For example, we could be talking about top secret documents that are stored in a safe and must not be seen. But when we talk about the mystery of God, we’re not talking about such secrets that must remain hidden forever. Instead, we’re talking about the true fact that God wants and has revealed Himself to us and that’s why Matthew 17:1-9 is written. It’s about Jesus revealing Himself to us. God wants us to know who Jesus is. We shouldn’t just think that Jesus was a very nice person or just a prophet or a philanthropist, but we should know that Jesus is the One of whom the Old Testament prophets foretold, and He is also the One who perfectly fulfills God’s Law. So, Jesus stands as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in the midst of God’s revelation. That’s why Jesus specifically took His disciples up the mountain with Him – they should know. And Jesus also takes us today by the hand and wants to show us who He is. It is crucial that we know who Jesus is. So, let’s go up the mountain with the disciples Peter, James, and John. There we should see the mystery of God.

Now the path to the top is difficult and steep. The mystery of God is incomprehensible to us. Our reason is like a great wall of stone before us. We agree that Jesus was very nice and had to have been an especially good person too, but our reason places a big question mark in front of Jesus: “yes, but...all these stories about Jesus’ miracles are a little exaggerated and maybe even phony. They are so unrealistic and don’t fit into our normal life.” Jesus leads the three disciples up a high mountain. Jesus is the initiator of this hike, He wants to show the three disciples, and us as well, who Jesus is. The disciples know Jesus well. They spent all their time with Him. They ate with Him and shared all other normal human needs with Jesus. They truly learned that Jesus was a completely normal person. And now they should go up to the top of the mountain. They would see that Jesus was completely different too. But we are so skeptical. We are so tied to earth, we are such “Yes, but...” people. We say things like: Yes, in faith you should rejoice and be happy. And faith can help people in special emergency situations. It can even be a support in raising children so that they are polite and well-behaved...but we should remain realistic, we shouldn’t forget the problems that burden us here in the world. We don’t get very far with the “yes, but...” sentences. These sentences won’t get us up the mountain. We might be able to buy postcards and hear from others about how beautiful it is up there, but we won’t get there ourselves. Jesus takes the three disciples and us up the mountain with Him. We should get out of the basement of disbelief and doubt – Get up the mountain, up to see the mystery of God! Up, yes, but... what about my poor legs that feel like lead and besides that, I have so much luggage on my back... is it even possible to reach the top? Can I have faith? Isn’t faith a gift that only special people are given? For us, and for the disciples no less, faith in Jesus seems extremely problematic. Faith in Jesus is a mystery. It shouldn’t be confused with our feelings. And when I mix up faith with my own feelings and abilities, I am just as helpless and overextended as the hiker with his tired legs. And the sin that I carry with me and the history that I bring with me as a human being weigh heavily on me. I must tell myself: “I actually don’t fit in with Jesus!” Perhaps

others have had special experiences with Jesus, but I haven't. I can't. But Jesus places Himself before us. He takes us by the hand. With the power of the Holy Spirit, He takes us by the hand with Peter, James, and John and leads us higher and higher. And finally, we are there. Arrived! Whoever arrives at the top is usually out of breath. We are tired... but the view sweeps us away. We see the vastness and we are amazed. How different the world looks from up here! The problems that we had down there, and which appeared so overwhelming, are all at once just small dots on the horizon - some have even disappeared completely! We only see the vastness! And we are amazed! A scientist once said, you can't know Jesus by dissecting Him with a surgeon's scalpel. If we stand before Jesus with our skeptical thoughts and our many "yes, but..." questions, we will never know who He is. But when we experience Jesus as someone who has just given us a great and very expensive gift, we can only look into the vastness and sing His praises in amazement and stammering! Peter, James, and John had just such an amazing mountain experience. Their eyes were opened, and they saw Moses, who represents the Law, and Elijah, who represents the Prophets, standing next to Jesus all at once. For these disciples, all at once it became clear: Jesus, who they had eaten and lived with, is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets! Peter is so excited by this experience that he wants to hold on to all of this forever. "Let's build tents! Let's stay here forever!" Peter doesn't want to let any of this go! He only ever wants mountaintop experiences! He probably would like a place right next to Jesus in the tent - a place where there are no more doubts, a place where everything is clear, a place where you no longer have to deal with simple human problems! Like in Goethe's *Faust*, he wants to say in the moment: "Ah, linger on, thou art so fair!"

Yet a voice from heaven brought the dream to an end. "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." And then everything was back to normal. Fear returned and they fell to the ground. The moment when everything was the most beautiful, everything disappeared: the cloud, Moses, Elijah... and above all, there was once again a great, big "but..." Now, one could say that doubt and fear are always victorious in the end. Too much faith, too many mountaintop experiences, too much enthusiasm is no good. In the end, everything just gets worse! The account we read here ends with a very short sentence: "and when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only." And then Jesus did what He had done in the beginning, He took them by the hand. But this time, the path didn't lead to the top of the mountain. Not up now, but down into the depths. The disciples were to return to the depths of doubt and unbelief. From now on, the path would lead directly to Jerusalem, to the depths of the cross and being forsaken by God. The disciples would doubt Jesus. They would even run away in fear. They would deny Him and betray Him. The path down is a good description of our human existence here on earth. The path down also describes how Jesus' best friends act! The path down describes the path of the Church! The path of the Church is a long path to the cross. Our own path is also a long path to the cross. And the disciples would remember just one thing - these words straight from God's mouth: "...listen to Him." With this, we are at the beginning of the sermon again, back to the mystery of God. Great is the mystery of God. That is and remains true. We can't understand God. He remains hidden to us. We also can't understand God's path with Jesus. We also can't understand why He must choose this strange path to the cross in order to save the world. And above all, we can't understand what all this has to do with us and with our lives. We also can't understand why God doesn't show Himself to us more clearly. But that is exactly where Jesus places Himself before us. He speaks kindly to us. He steadfastly speaks to us through His Word. And we take His hand and go - sometimes in doubt, sometimes in strong faith, and sometimes wondering and blinking. Great is the mystery of God in Jesus. Amen.