

The Past, Transfigured
Matthew 17:1-13
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The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is probably not the best choice for celebrating a church anniversary. After all, the story does pretty clearly redirect the disciples, and therefore us, away from the past and toward the future. The time for celebrating the heroes of the past is short indeed; no sooner has Peter offered up the idea of making a comfortable place for Moses and Elijah to spend some time with them, than the cloud comes rolling in, and the two disappear. If there is a lesson for us here tonight, it is that should we make too big a deal of the past, and if the lights go out in the middle of our pancake supper, do not be surprised if some of your tablemates have suddenly disappeared.

The truth is that I don't really have any worry that ECF will spend too much time on its past exploits. If anything, we may be too inclined to leave our history behind. But many of you have probably been involved with more tradition-bound churches, for whom the prospect of the future is not nearly as powerful as the past, and so very little ever changes, as the building, and the mythology, and the guiding lights of the past become ever more untouchable. Maybe you've heard some variation on the following sentiment: "Oh, the Jones family donated that lovely table and it's been there in that same spot for 35 years. We couldn't possibly move it; they'd be just heartbroken!" when of course, everyone in the Jones family has

been dead or gone from the church for a very long time, and the Jones family table has been causing people to trip over it for 35 years. Yes, the power of the past is truly impressive, and a reason why many churches wonder why year by year there are fewer families like “The Jones’s.” What they don’t realize is that when the Jones’s first started coming to their church, it was precisely because the church looked to the future, and not the past.

Please do not misunderstand me. Our history is vitally important to us, as individuals, as families, and yes, and churches. Those old stories about how the church got started, and who laid the cornerstone, and when the tornado just missed us, and all the other historic elements of a long and faithful ministry, sometimes those are exactly the memories that keep us going when the future doesn’t look so bright. Those are the stories that help us remember that we can do something wonderful when we are dispirited about our possibilities. Those are the identity-forming traditions that give us a strong enough sense of self to have the freedom to experiment and not feel threatened by change. Those are the stories of our faithful God, leading us, challenging us, provoking us. It is good to remember.

Moses and Elijah, the two figures who appeared with Jesus on the mountaintop, represent some of the best aspects of the history of God’s people. Moses, whom ECF’s children are studying for the next few weeks, led God’s people out of bondage to freedom, the defining event that shaped the identity of the people for hundreds, even thousands of years. Elijah the prophet, one of only two

characters in the Bible to not die, but rather to be taken up directly into heaven, challenged God's people to be true to that original identity, to the covenant established with them back in Moses' time. These are two towering figures in the memory of Peter and James and John, and they deserve to be remembered, even to be celebrated. What they did means something to us even today! And so we should not be surprised that they join Jesus for his shining moment, a pivotal moment in the story when Jesus' own identity as the Messiah, the Son of the living God is being fleshed out more fully, and his journey to Jerusalem is just beginning in earnest, and his mission has become more focused. These moments of change and transition are precisely the moments when remembering where we come from is vitally important, to establish our continuity with what God had done in the past, and promises to do in the future. The need to touch base with the past may or may not have been important for Jesus himself – hard to tell with the author of history – but God knew it was important for Peter and James and John, and so they were led to that mountaintop with Jesus.

But as important as it was for the disciples to connect Jesus with the past, it was even more crucial they connect him with the future. And so his face shines, so they can see that the glory of the Lord is not merely a distant memory. And so the cloud rolls in, so they know that God's presence is not just a thing of the past. So they find him alone, so they can learn that it will be Jesus alone, rather than the figures of the past, who will lead and accompany them into their future. The future

belongs to Jesus, and to his disciples who will share it with him. The future will not at all be like they imagine, certainly not like their mountaintop experience, but even after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension, they will still see that the glory of the Lord is not merely a distant memory, that God's presence is not a thing of the past, and that it will be Jesus, rather than the figures of the past, who will lead and accompany them into their future. And they will need all of that stuff they can get if the story does not end at Calvary, because what does their future hold? Despair at Jesus' death, hiding in an upper room, persecution at the hands of their enemies, prison, floggings, even death by execution. No, the future is not as rosy as they might have thought coming down from the mountain, having witnessed more firepower in Jesus' face than in the very sun itself.

Tonight, as we gather for our church's 25th anniversary, I have no fear that we will party too heartily recalling our exploits of the past. Rather, if we should be cautious of something, it is the risk of disconnecting from the glory and presence of God, and the companionship of Jesus Christ that having a history-less past can promote. ECF's turnover is so great that there are only a handful of people here tonight who were here when the church began, and probably more than fifty percent of us have been here for five years or less. In fact, would those of you who have been attending ECF for two years or less please stand up? In so many churches, the opposite is true, that there are very few people who are new to the pews. It is not that ECF has no history, no exploits to recall, far from it. Ask the

Garretts, ask the Bergsmas. It is simply that its history is disbursed, scattered around the world, and that the majority of those who are here now know little of it, and can therefore take little power from it. It is as if the Transfiguration took place without Moses and Elijah present, and Peter and James and John missing the links to God's faithfulness they represent. God is doing a new thing in Jesus to be sure, but God is not starting from scratch. How much more amazing is Jesus Christ knowing how faithful God has been since the beginning? Jesus is not the fulfillment of a promise if no promise was made in the first place. What patience and loving-kindness our God has with us that we can only see remembering Moses and Elijah on the mountaintops of their own times, experiencing glory and presence that subsequent generations squandered. Yes, having a sense of history helps us to remember that God makes promises and God keeps promises, and that we are the inheritors of those promises, but also laborers in the vineyard of promises for those who will follow us.

Twenty-five years is but a blink of the eye for God, and but the beginning of the road for ECF. But it is also an enormous achievement for so transient a community as ours tends to be. We don't have the Jones's table to trip over, and that is a good thing, but we also don't have the Jones's table to remind us of the Jones's. Tonight, as we both join together at the Lord's Table for the Sacrament of Communion, but also as we join together at tables of fellowship for dinner, I would like you to reflect on the presence and labors of both those who are here now, as

well as those who we do not see around us tonight, those who for however long they were here, witnessed to us of God's glory and presence, and the companionship of Christ on the journey. Indeed, it may be that those who visited just once while on vacation, or for a month while at language school, or who stayed nine months while on an office swap, or three years for an embassy posting, have been a more important influence on our history than we might imagine. The shining faces of all who have passed through our doors, no matter where those doors were, reveal much about God, and about the future our God has for us. I began by saying that the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is probably not the best choice for celebrating a church anniversary. OK, so maybe it is not the best choice, but it is a good one, especially if we will allow our past to be transfigured, and seeing in it, like the disciples did in Jesus, the grace that has always been with us, the Spirit who continues to lead us, and the promise of Christ that accompanies us now and into our future. Amen.