

Reading the Last Chapter First Matthew 17:1-9

Let's take a poll. Raise your hand if you like coffee. Raise your hand if you don't. If you raised your hand for coffee, raise your hand for Starbuck... Dunkin donuts...

Interesting. Raise your hand if you are a cat person. Dog person? ... Morning person? Night owl?

If I keep going I may start some serious conflict. But there's one more habit that divides people. How many of you read a book from beginning to end? How many of you peek at the ending first to see if you'll like the story?

A few years ago psychologists from UC San Diego did a study on book reading habits and found that those who read the end of a story first actually enjoyed the story more than those who read the story from beginning to end? They discovered that people who know the end of the story first process what they're reading better and gain a deeper understanding of the action in the story.ⁱ

On the other hand, knowing the end of a story can be incredibly frustrating to some people and dangerous for the spoiler. A movie goer was beaten up last year when he came out of a theater and loudly announced to fans waiting in line for the next showing the ending to the movie Avengers: Endgame which had just come out.ⁱⁱ

This morning is a very special Sunday in the life of the church. It's Transfiguration Sunday, a day when Peter, James and John get a peek at the end of the story. In this mountaintop moment, these disciples get a glimpse of Jesus' true identity and mission.

Six days earlier, Jesus confronted his disciples about their lack of faith and asked them two pivotal questions: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Then he asked them, "And who do you say that I am?"

To the first question the disciples answered, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Sounds like the answer to your average opinion poll, doesn't it?

But to the second question — who do you say that I am? — everybody got strangely quiet. I wonder if they made eye contact with Jesus? Simon Peter was the only one to speak up: "You are the Messiah," he said, "the Son of the living God."

And with that answer, at that moment, Jesus blesses him by changing his name. The name Simon literally means "to hear" or "he has heard," and the name Peter means "rock."

Simon Peter heard the truth from God - that Jesus is the Messiah, and because of this, Jesus changed his name to Peter - Rock, because the truth of his confession would become the rock on which God would build the worldwide church. Sounds like a great story, doesn't it? Until we encounter a plot twist.

Immediately after revealing to his disciples that he was the Messiah sent from God, Jesus tells them that he must go to Jerusalem to contend with the religious leaders, be killed and rise again after three days. This completely caught the disciples off guard.

Peter tried to argue with Jesus, and Jesus quickly shut him down. How could that be part of the plan? Wasn't the Messiah supposed to lead a revolt against Rome and restore political power to the nation of Israel? How did Jesus' death fit into that story line?

It's then that today's passage begins: READ MATTHEW 17:1-9

There it is. Peter, James and John got a peek at the end of the story. In this man, at this moment, on this mountain, God's ultimate plan for humanity is revealed. The whole of human history is pointing in a certain direction. And in the Transfiguration, we see what that direction is.

First of all, in this moment, the disciples see who Christ really is. On that mountaintop the disciples begin to understand that Jesus isn't simply a man who has been touched by the glory of God. He is the glory of God in human flesh, and he's been hiding his glory from human eyes until now.

John would later write of this moment: **"The Word became flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** (John 1:14, NIV)

Up until then, Peter, James and John may have struggled with the idea that Jesus was a great holy man, a great teacher, a mystic, a prophet. At the transfiguration, all those ideas were put to rest. Jesus isn't just sent from God; He is God come to earth to redeem His people.

Father Sergio Benitez was known as a caring priest who operated a small orphanage in Mexico. At least that was his identity by day. By night, unknown to his flock, Father Benitez put on a mask and cape and transformed himself into a professional wrestler named Fray Tormenta, or Friar Storm.

For almost twenty-three years, Father Benitez hid his identity from his fans, wrestling to earn prize money to keep his orphanage running. Over the years many of the orphans under Father Benitez' care went on to productive, successful lives. One of these former orphans is now a criminal law specialist who, at night, dons mask and cape and wrestles as Fray Tormenta Jr. in honor of the priest who fought on his behalf.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this moment, Peter, James and John get a peek at Jesus' true identity. Jesus is God revealed in human flesh. This is crucial. That means that anything he says or does is absolute truth. Any plan he sets in motion is unquestionable, unshakeable, set in stone. Any action he performs or word he speaks is absolutely holy and expresses the heart and mind of God.

In this moment, they also see the mission of Christ fulfilled. Why did Moses and Elijah appear on this mountain at this moment? Matthew doesn't tell us, but in Luke 9 (the parallel to Matthew's lesson), Luke says that Jesus, Moses and Elijah talked about Jesus' upcoming death. Why?

Because Jesus' death and resurrection would complete the ministries of Moses and Elijah begun more than 1,500 years before.

Through Moses, God gave the law that would define God's relationship with the nation of Israel. And yet the law was also a symbol of our failure to live up to God's holiness. Elijah represented the greatest prophet to the nation of Israel. And yet the prophets failed too. Now God Himself, in the form of Jesus, had come to fulfill the mission of the law and the prophets which was to call people back to a true relationship with God.

In 2008, the Western Oregon Women's Softball Wolves and the Central Washington University Women's Softball Wildcats were pitted against each other for the final game before the division playoffs. Sara Tucholsky played for Oregon. She was not one of their strongest players, but that day she hit a home run, the only one she'd hit all year.

As she ran around the baseline, she missed first base. As she turned back to touch the base, Sara tore her ACL badly and was unable to walk much less run the bases. If her teammates helped her, she'd be called out by the umpires.

She was safe on first base, but she couldn't even stand up on her own, much less run the bases. The fans began shouting for Sara to get off the field, but she wouldn't budge.

Just then, Mallory Holtman, who played first base for the opposing team, jogged out onto the field and lifted Sara Tucholsky up from the dirt. She called out to the umpires, "Can I help her around the bases?"

One umpire shouted back, "Why would you want to do that?" But no one heard Mallory answer. The umpire said, "Do it". So Mallory half-carried her injured opponent toward second base. Other Wildcats came onto the field to help.

They carried Sara as she hobbled around the baseline, stopping long enough at second, then third, and finally home plate for Sara to touch the base. The crowd rose to its feet as Mallory Holtman and the Wildcats helped Sara Tucholsky of the Wolves make her first home run.^{iv}

You see, no matter how hard we try, we humans always fall short of the law and the prophets. In fact, they remind us of our failure to match God's holiness. The law could not save us. The prophets could not save us. God saw our fallen state, and He sent Jesus to lift us up out of the dirt. By his own sacrifice, he carried us to home plate.

Notice in verses 5-8, Peter wants to build three booths on the mountain, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, so they could stay longer. But while he's still making the suggestion, God interrupts him. Notice that! God interrupts him! When God interrupts you, it's time to stop talking.

This passage says, "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!'"

Those are the exact same words God spoke when Jesus was baptised with one major difference. At the transfiguration God ended with a command, "Listen to Him!" Not to Moses. Not to Elijah. Not to any other great prophet or mystic or holy man. Listen to Jesus. He is the very voice of God.

Then scripture says, "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."

Note that in your bible. That's significant. When they looked up, no one is there except Jesus. Moses' ministry is over; Elijah's ministry is complete. They could go home to be with God. The only one left on that mountain is Jesus. The only one to look to is Jesus. The only one to listen to is Jesus. Any competing beliefs or philosophies disappear in the truth of who Jesus is and what his mission accomplished.

In this man Jesus, at this moment, on this mountain, the disciples saw the One True God. No one else could imitate his glory. No one else could speak God's perfect truth. No one else had the power to restore humanity back to God.

Knowing the truth about Christ means making a decision. The apostle Paul wrote in Second Corinthians 1: 20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God." This is a glimpse of God's promises fulfilled. This is a peek at God's ultimate "Yes" over Creation.

What about you? When you see the “Yes” of God, can you respond “Amen?” Can you say, “Yes, Jesus is the One True God, and I give my life to him?” Your identity, your mission and your destiny are all in how you answer that question.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/aug/17/spoilers-enhance-enjoyment-psychologists>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1119768/avengers-endgame-man-beaten-outside-cinema-loudly-revealing-spoilers-final-scene>.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.cracked.com/article_18626_6-real-people-with-secret-identities-nobody-saw-coming.html.

^{iv} Cited by Max Lucado, *Unshakable Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), Chapter 7.