Looking to Jesus
Matthew 17:1-9
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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Lent 2

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."

I

Once in a while, you will hear people say that the Bible doesn't deal with politics. The Bible only deals with spiritual things, they claim, and has nothing to say about economics, race relations, refugees, and especially politics. For these people, the Bible only addresses spiritual issues. The Bible isn't political.

But we who read the Bible more carefully know that the Bible is deeply political. We see the Bible's attention to politics in books like Esther and Daniel, where the main characters are required to work against their will in the courts of the Babylonian and Persian Empires. We see it in the history books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings, which are preoccupied with who holds national political power and how they use it. We see it in the prophets, who constantly evaluate the performance of political leaders by how well they treat poor people, refugees, widows, and orphans. The Bible's attention to politics is obvious in the Old Testament.

When we read the New Testament superficially, we might suppose that it doesn't deal with politics. But we must remember that Christian writers had to be careful about bluntly evaluating the empire, for the simple reason that overtly criticizing Rome could quickly get you into trouble. Local political rulers in every city and town owed their positions to Roman patronage, and in turn these same rulers kept their ears and eyes

open for signs of opposition and dissent. Christians, along with everyone else, had to be careful what they said in public and what they wrote down on papyrus.

In order to survive within the Roman world as people of integrity, the writers of the New Testament learned how to disguise their critiques of Rome. A favorite technique was using insider language that only Christians would know how to interpret correctly, but that Roman outsiders would miss. A great illustration of this is Revelation 18 and 19. A Roman person reading this text might have said, "Ah, this poem is about the ancient city of Babylon because it says so right at the very beginning: 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling-place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit'" (18:2, NRSV).

But first century Christians knew this poem wasn't about Babylon at all. They knew "Babylon" was a code word for "Rome," the capital city of the empire which dominated so many aspects of their lives. It was Rome that was "a dwelling-place of demons." It was Rome that was "a haunt of every foul spirit." And when the city finally collapses at the beginning of chapter 19, the multitudes of heaven erupt with shouts of hallelujah and loud praise to God. When Rome falls, heaven celebrates.

II

In other New Testament passages, the Christian critique of Rome is more subtle. A splendid illustration is the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17. A quick glance you will probably make you think it has nothing to do with politics. It seems to be a simple, straight-forward story about Jesus climbing up a mountain with three followers. While they're up there Jesus is transfigured; his face shines like the sun and his clothes become white. A voice from heaven says Jesus is "my Son, the Beloved." In response the disciples fall down and worship him. Though there are a few more details, that's the gist of the story. Nothing in the story explicitly mentions Rome, the emperor, the legions, or anything else about the empire. You might suppose that of all the stories in Matthew, this one is surely the most devoid of political meaning. Surely the meaning of this story is purely spiritual!

But remember a detail I mentioned last Sunday about the gospel of Matthew as a whole. The events in Matthew revolve around a core conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, in particular the Roman Empire. Because this big conflict drives the story line, we can keep asking ourselves a simple question: what does the particular story we're studying right now tell us about this overarching conflict? Whether it's a miracle story, a parable, or something else, what's at stake in this particular text for the larger conflict between good and evil, between Jesus and all the forces arrayed against him?

III

I suggest that this story in Matthew 17 actually does have political meaning which speaks to the ongoing struggle between Jesus and the powers of evil. To understand how, we have to turn to a Roman poet named Publius Papinius Statius, who lived in the last decades of the first century. Statius lived and worked during the same time that the gospel of Matthew was being edited into its final form. For most of his career as a poet, Statius lived in the city of Rome. Like other Roman poets, he was expected to craft poetry that praised the reigning emperor. Sometimes this poetry was even read aloud in large public gatherings. In this way Roman poetry served the emperor and his empire. Poetry was designed as political rhetoric that praised the emperor's character, speech, and actions. Most of this poetry was over-the-top extreme. Many phrases in these poems were in fact lies intended to hoodwink ordinary people.

Domitian was the emperor who reigned during the last fifteen years of Statius' life. After becoming emperor, Domitian seized power from the Roman Senate and made himself even more central to the functioning of the government than some of previous emperors had been. Domitian was also a megalomaniac who craved praise from other people. So when Statius sat down to praise Domitian in his poetry, he went over the top. In some of his poems, he claimed that anyone could look at Domitian and see "immortal brightness." He said that divine splendor and rays of light shine from Domitian's face. The light coming from the emperor's face is so bright that it outshines the morning star and

the constellations in the sky.[1] Statius' rhetoric made the emperor a representative of the gods; it turned the emperor into a savior who would protect the Roman Empire.

This kind of imperial political speech was in the air when the gospel of Matthew was written. In this kind of political context, the gospel of Matthew uses the story of Jesus' transfiguration to debunk the lies being said about the emperor. The story of the transfiguration says five things that contradict Roman imperial ideology.

- First, Jesus' face shines like the sun, not the emperor's (v. 2).
- Second, it reminds the early Christian community—and us—that Jesus is the one dressed in dazzling clothes, not the emperor (v. 2).
- Third, it shows us that Jesus is the son of God, not the emperor (v. 5).
- Fourth, it clarifies for us that God is well pleased with Jesus, not with the emperor (v. 6).
- Fifth, it calls us to fall down and worship Jesus in holy fear, instead of worshipping the emperor (v. 6).

In these five ways, the story of the transfiguration functions as a subtle yet robust critique of the Roman emperor, and by extension, a critique of the empire which he controls. For Christian readers in the know, this text reorients us to Jesus Christ, rather than to political rulers of any time or place who portray themselves as saviors. This story renews our dedication to the God portrayed in the Bible, and helps to vaccinate us against the signs and symbols of civil religion.

The transfiguration of Jesus summons us to evaluate the political rhetoric of whatever nation we happen to be living in, to refocus our eyes on Jesus, and to reserve our worship for the one God revealed to us in Christ.

[1] Quoted in Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 26. In an older English translation, Statius' poetry may be found at https://archive.org/stream/statiusstat01statuoft#page/206/mode/2up. See *Silvae* IV.1.1-3, 23-27, p. 206 ff).