



First United Church of Oak Park

God's History

Matthew 17:1-8

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Poor Peter. He doesn't come off very well here, does he? One little remark about making some tents for Moses and Elijah. That's all. And Peter doesn't merely get corrected. The voice of God calls out from a cloud to set Peter straight, the voice of God clarifies what he should be taking away from this vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah — two of the greatest figures in the history of the Hebrew people.

Peter wanted to build them some tents, that's all; he wanted to have the chance to spend some days with them, to linger in the glory of the past. And the voice of God tells Peter in no uncertain terms that he has to keep his mind in the present, on the work that there still was to do. "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him." God tells Peter in no uncertain terms that he has to keep his mind in the present, on the work that there still was to do.

But who could blame Peter for wanting to linger alongside the memory of these figures? And why reveal this vision of these great figures of history in the first place if it is not to luxuriate in the glory of what they did? This is Moses and Elijah! Elijah, he was the greatest wonder-worker the people had ever seen, he defended the truth when lies sat on the throne, he defended what was right in a time when wickedness held power. Elijah even stood up to death and death backed down. This is Elijah! And then there's Moses, the leader who defeated Pharaoh in order to win freedom for the people, who led them through the wilderness, who stood in the very presence of God and heard firsthand from God what a just society for all people should look like. This is Moses! And Elijah! Some of the greatest figures in the history of the Hebrew people. Of course Peter wanted to linger alongside the memory of these great figures. Who wouldn't? And yet the voice of God tells Peter that he has to keep his mind in the present, in the work that there still was to do. Yes, the memory of what Moses and Elijah

did was glorious, and it must be remembered. But if Peter allowed himself to focus only on the past, he would miss that the one he followed was Jesus — who still had much work to do, and much need of Peter. Jesus, whose work was about life and death. Jesus, whose name is not eclipsed by any. If Peter lingered on the past, he would miss out on the present work God was calling him to do.

The lesson I take today from this story of the transfiguration has to do with history. God reveals a vision of the greatest figures in history, then tells Peter to keep his mind on the present. This balance teaches an important lesson about what history is. What is the purpose of history, what is the purpose of recalling the past and retelling stories people have already heard? The purpose of history is to understand the present, and to lend the gift of wisdom: that is, an understanding of what should be done. This requires a balancing — remembering the great figures of the past, and also keeping my eyes firmly fixed on the work to be done today.

Why talk so much about history? Well, today is February 14, the birthday of Frederick Douglass. This was one of the main reasons why historian Carter G. Woodson chose to begin work to set aside time in February to particularly recall centrally important Black figures of American history. Originally just a week, Black History Month only came into existence in 1976, less than three years before my brother was born. Not ancient history by any means.

It is right to lift up and remember great figures, figures like Fannie Lou Hamer, who led unprecedentedly successful voter registration drives among Black Americans in Mississippi. For her efforts she was threatened, extorted, shot at, and widely criticized in public for going too far. It is right to lift up and remember great figures, figures like Medgar Evers, who led potent nonviolent direct actions to integrate previously segregated public beaches, who himself applied to a previously segregated Mississippi law school. For his efforts, Medgar Evers was assassinated. The bullet of a bigot was not the only thing that killed him, though. He was brought — alive — to the closest hospital, where he was denied care — denied entry upon his arrival — because of his race. Systemic racism added its own violence to Medgar Evers' death; it wasn't only a bullet that killed him, but systemic racism, too.

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understand how the present came to be, and to lend the gift of wisdom, that is, an understanding of what should be done. This requires a balancing — remembering the great figures of the past, and also keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the work to be done today.

Yes, Fannie Lou Hamer did great things in the arena of voter registration — and there is important work to be done in voting rights access right now. It's impossible to tell the story of the 2020 election in an honest way without talking about Black voter turnout in Georgia led by Stacey Abrams. Yes, Medgar Evers did great things in the arena of nonviolent direct action — and there is hugely important work being done right now in nonviolent direct action. It's impossible to tell the story of our national reckoning with police violence without talking about the Black Lives Matter movement and the massive protests following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddy Gray and many, many more.

In Black History Month it is important to remember great figures from history. And also, the voice of God still calls out as it did to Peter on that mountaintop. God still calls us to remember the present work that is still ours to do. And here in Oak Park there is much good work to do today. It is right to celebrate Brown vs. the Board of Education. And also, Superintendent Joylynn Pruitt-Adams' retirement has placed the future of equity at OPRF in question — there is work to do. American education is still unequal, the work continues. It is right to celebrate Fannie Lou Hamer's voter registration drive, it is right to celebrate that Kamala Harris is the first Black woman to be vice president. And also, the board of trustees for the Village of Oak Park is much whiter than the town itself: the work continues. It is right to decry the systemic racist violence that allowed Medgar Evers to die having been refused treatment at a hospital. And also, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare vast health disparities in our health care system: the work continues.

This is good work. We remember the great figures of the past in order to understand the present, in order to gain access to wisdom: that is, an understanding of what needs to be done. And to be inspired, in order to know that courage, and righteousness, and victory, are all possible. Thanks be to God for the gift of history.