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DELIGHTING IN THE “MONSTER” Matthew 17

Twelve days ago Laurie and I left for a vacation in one of our favorite places in the world. We were given a gift certificate to a restaurant there that we have heard about for years but never been to because it is not in the same solar system as our budget. We got off the plane and went straight to the restaurant, which was good because we were hungry. It was a gorgeous, warm day. Soon we were seated at a table, looking out toward the ocean. It was spectacular. We began eating and the food was terrific. I was surprised to see that Laurie was crying. I asked if she was okay. She said, “It is so beautiful here. Everything is just perfect. I’m so happy.”

This kind of thing happens occasionally with Laurie because she lives very much in the moment. She truly experiences life because she pays attention to wherever she is. Life is mostly routine, isn’t it? It is rare that we have events or experiences that are so profound that we never forget them, but all of us have at least some of those. Can you recall moments that were so awesome, so profound that they almost took your breath away, so memorable that years cannot erase the feel of those moments?

You could take all the most profound, dramatic moments of our lives, roll them together and the sum total would not have as much impact as an event we are going to look at today in Matthew 17. It is an event that we will some day experience, and it will be the very definition of awesome and breathtaking. But this event has significance for us even as we go about our day to day lives right now. Let’s look at Matthew 17.

JESUS SHOWED HIS TRUE SELF

About a week after the events of chapter 16 when the disciples finally said they believed Jesus was Messiah, Jesus takes Peter, James and John, up on a mountain to have a once in a lifetime experience. Actually it was a once in history experience. We don’t actually know where this took place. Tradition says it was Mt. Tabor, which was not far from Nazareth. However, at that time there was a fortress with a Roman garrison on Mt. Tabor so it is unlikely that these events happened there. There are other suggestions, but in the end we are just guessing.

While they were on this mountain an astounding thing happened. Verse 2 says Jesus was “transfigured” before them. Literally he was metamorphosed right before their eyes. His face blazed like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Luke gives us a sense of how brilliant the light coming off Jesus was. He says in Luke 9:29 that “his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” Matthew says Jesus’ face “shone like the sun.” Have you ever tried to stare at the sun? When you look at it the sun is so brilliant and intense that you can’t look at it. You squint, your eyes water and you have to look away. The light coming off Jesus was that bright and brilliant.

What was going on here? The night before Jesus was arrested as he was praying he said to his Father in John 17:5, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world began.” That’s a profound statement that could only be made by a person who was deeply delusional and had totally lost contact with reality, or by someone who was what Jesus claimed to be, the one and only Son of God. He existed before the world began. I am really old, but I can guarantee you that I did not exist before the world began. In that existence Jesus had glory. What was happening on the mountain was a bit of that glory was showing up.

Hebrews 1:3 says of Jesus, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory.” Radiance is, obviously, that which is radiated. The radiance of the sun is the light and heat that it emits. Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory, his magnificent light being emitted. 1 Timothy 6:15-16 describes God as “The blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.” He lives in such brilliant light that no one can approach it because it is simply too overwhelmingly brilliant. Jesus shared in that, and on that mountain it was briefly revealed.

Later the apostle John was given a vision that included a glimpse of Jesus Christ in all his glory. In Revelation 1:14 he said, “The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were a blazing fire.” In verse 16 he said, “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” That night on the mountain the 3 disciples were given just a peek at that brilliant light.

This surely was a stunning sight for the disciples. Suddenly this man that had known so well began blazing with light so powerful it was blinding. Later Paul would be exposed to that brilliant light and it would literally blind him for several days. Those guys had no category for understanding what they were seeing, just as

we don't today. We've never seen anything like it, and can't even envision exactly what that would look like. But we know it would leave us grasping for some way to understand it.

That was dramatic and stunning, but there was more to come. Verse 3 says, "Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus." The text indicates that they didn't come walking up the mountain. Matthew says they just appeared, like Scotty had beamed them down. There are the obvious questions about how this could possibly have happened, given that Elijah and Moses lived many hundreds of years before these events and had been gone a long time. Obviously this required a miracle. So the answer to how it could have happened is that God did something we can't comprehend.

But why Moses and Elijah? Why not Abraham or David or Isaiah or any number of other Old Testament heroes? And let's not be sexist. Maybe Sarah, Ruth and Esther should have represented. Most scholars think that Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the prophets. The idea then is that all of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets led up to and pointed toward Jesus Christ. That's possible, but at the end of the day that is nothing more than conjecture because we aren't told.

Another question I wonder about is how did the disciples know it was Moses and Elijah? The disciples obviously didn't have pictures of them, so how did they know? The simplest answer is that Jesus must have told them. But there is no indication of that in the text so I wonder if the answer might lie in another direction. I'll say more about this in a bit

Mark 9:6 says that the disciples were so frightened by the whole event they didn't know what to say. I think by that he means they were so awed and intimidated that they were almost speechless. Of course, not knowing what to say rarely stopped Peter from saying something. He blurted out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." That's why I don't think they were terrified. It was awesome, it was kind of scary, it was intimidating, but Peter thought it was good to be there! He liked being there.

Right at that point a luminous, glowing cloud enveloped the scene and they heard a voice say, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to

him.” That pretty well sent the disciples over the edge. They fell on the ground, feeling a sense of almost terror. But then Jesus touched them, told them to get up. He was no longer glowing. Moses and Elijah were gone. The cloud was gone. The event was over.

We know from the accounts of the other writers that Moses and Elijah discussed Jesus’ impending “departure” with him. In other words, they talked about his coming death on the cross. This event served as encouragement for Jesus as he approached the horrifying climax of his life, but also instruction for the disciples. They were to listen to Jesus, especially as he talked about his coming execution and resurrection.

JESUS HEALED A TOUGH ONE

On the way down the mountain Jesus and his pals had a discussion about Elijah, whom they had just seen. In it Jesus said in verses 11-12 he said, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him.” Wait, what? He’s going to come, but he has already come? What does that mean?

We know that Jesus was saying that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah. We’ve seen that before. So in a sense Elijah had already come. But he still will come. Before Jesus comes again the actual Elijah will make yet another appearance on earth. So Jesus meant that in a metaphorical sense Elijah had already come, but that in the literal sense at some time in the future Elijah would come again.

What followed that was Jesus’ encounter with a man whose son had seizures that were caused by demonic possession. Jesus’ remaining disciples had been trying to heal the man’s son but with no success. Verse 18 says Jesus quickly resolved the problem and the boy was restored to full health. This is a curious incident, for Jesus had previously given the disciples the power over demons and to heal people, but for some reason they had hit a wall in this case and totally failed.

This caused them to ask why they couldn’t deal with this case. Jesus said it was for one reason. Their faith was too small. At first it seems a bit surprising that the disciples’ faith was too small to deal with this situation. However, it is helpful to remember the incident in chapter 14 when Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee and for a few brief moments Peter did the same. Peter put his faith in Jesus who enabled him to take that memorable brief stroll. But we recall that in the face of wind and waves Peter’s faith failed and he went for a swim.

Peter serves as a picture of all of us. We seem able to put great faith in Jesus for brief periods, but that faith is not always as constant as we wish it were. We hit a spot where it is challenged, and our faith wavers. I suspect that is what happened to the disciples.

Years ago Laurie and I were on vacation and were at a shopping center listening to some locals in concert when suddenly everything went dark. The power had gone out, not just at the shopping center, but in the whole area. The next day we were talking to some clerks in a store and asked them about the power outage, since there was no obvious cause for it. They said, “Oh, that just happens every now and then. The power goes out for no apparent reason. We never know why.” Electric power is very frustrating when it is unreliable. Intermittent power is annoying. But it is also a lot like our faith. It would be nice if it was always flowing strong, but for most of us it doesn’t. At times it is great, but at other times it gets weak to non-existent. And that same was true with the disciples back then. Jesus reminds them that there is no end of amazing things they can do if they have even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed.

JESUS PAID HIS TAXES

The religious leaders of Israel were always trying to identify and highlight problems with Jesus and his disciples. In this chapter they come up with another one. Every Jewish man was required to pay a tax to the temple of 2 drachma every year. This tax was used to fund the upkeep and operations of the temple. There was no 2 drachma coin so often 2 men would go together to pay the tax with 1 shekel, which was worth 4 drachma, thus covering the tax for both of them.

At one point the people who collected that tax asked Peter if Jesus paid the tax. Peter, rather defensively I think, responded that he did, even though Peter didn’t really know. After that exchange Jesus asked Peter, “do kings tax their own sons or do they tax other people?” The answer, of course, is other people. That’s how it has always been. Peter knew that Jesus is the Son of God. The events early in this chapter confirmed that beyond any shadow of doubt. So as the Son of God, was Jesus subject to a tax to fund a temple dedicated to his Father? The answer is no. Jesus certainly was not subject to a tax to support a temple whose purpose was to be the center of worship of him. Nevertheless, Jesus told Peter that he did not want to offend people by refusing to pay the tax. In other words, though he was not subject to it, to keep from being a stumbling block he would pay the tax.

Jesus came up with a strange way to raise the money for the tax. He told Peter to go down to the lake and throw a fishing line in the water. He would catch a fish, and in the mouth of the fish he would find a shekel, which would pay the tax for both Jesus and Peter. This demonstrated several aspects of the character of Jesus. First it showed his humility. He subjected himself to a law he did not need to obey just to avoid causing problems for other people. He put himself in a position that might allow some people to think he was an ordinary person who was subject to the tax like everyone else. He refused to stand on his rights to avoid the tax.

Second, he reminded Peter once again that he had all the resources that would ever be needed. What he supplies is enough. You need money for the temple tax? Go down to the lake, toss your line in, catch a fish and find the needed coin in its mouth. What a vivid lesson for Peter and for us. How many times in his life do you suppose Peter found a shekel in the mouth of a fish he caught? I'm pretty sure that came to a grand total of once in his whole life.

Finally, once again we see Jesus' sense of humor. If you don't see the humor in this incident you are either not paying attention or you have no funny bone. You need a sense of humor transplant, because you apparently don't have one. This is hilarious. I'm quite sure Peter got a good laugh out of it.

APPLICATION

SEE THE GLORY OF OUR AWESOME LORD

There are numerous points of application we can see in this chapter. There is the need for constant faith, there is the need to humble ourselves the way Jesus did and not insist on our importance or our rights, and there is the astounding reminder that Jesus can and will provide what we need so we should always trust him.

However, what most stands out to me in this chapter is the glory of Jesus Christ. We get a small, brief glimpse here of the spectacular glory of Jesus. We see the glory of Jesus when we see and acknowledge his goodness and his wisdom. We see it in his power, the power over nature itself and ultimately even over death. We see it blazing in his mercy, his unlimited love and his truly amazing grace. We see it in his incredible humility. His glory was on full display at that stable in Bethlehem and on the cross near Jerusalem. We are reminded of his glory when we are reminded that everything that is created has come into being through him. When Laurie and I were on vacation one day we did some stand up paddle boarding. We were out on the water and both of us were struck by the beauty of the water. It was this translucent glowing teal color that was, well, it was just glorious.

We actually were getting a glimpse of the glory of Jesus Christ, who imagined and then created that spectacular beauty.

John was given a vision of the Lord in his unveiled glory, blazing with radiant light. In Revelation 1:17 you can see the effect it had on him. He said, “When I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead.” In Daniel 10 the prophet was given a vision in which he saw what was likely the Lord Jesus in his glory before he entered this world. In verse 6 he said, “his face like lightning, his eyes like blazing torches.” Verse 7 says there were people with him who didn’t see the vision, but who were affected powerfully nonetheless. “Such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves.” In verse 8 Daniel says, “I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless.” In verse 9 he says, “I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.” In other words, he fainted.

Jesus has glory so overpowering if we see it full blast we end up like John and Daniel, face down on the ground. Even the presence of it can seize us with such terror that we run and hide. There was some of that on that mountain where Jesus’ true glory briefly flared into vision. My point is not that we should cower in terror before the Lord, but that we should understand that he is so glorious, so spectacular, so powerful that his full on glory is literally overwhelming.

The Old Testament mentions repeatedly that the response we would have if we saw his glory and that we should have toward him is to “fear the Lord.” Psalm 112:1 contains an odd juxtaposition. “Praise the Lord. Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands.” It seems strange to talk about fearing the Lord, then finding delight in his commands in the same sentence. We don’t usually delight in things that we fear.

Recently I had to undergo a medical test that is rather invasive. I made the mistake of looking it up on the Internet. On the positive side, I learned what they were going to do. On the negative side, I learned what they were going to do. Learning was positive in that I was prepared for what was going to happen. But it was also negative because I was apprehensive, knowing it wasn’t going to feel good.

That negative apprehension grew when the doctor informed me that he was going to begin by giving me a shot of lidocaine. That’s not good news because I know that lidocaine is a pain killer. They don’t give you lidocaine to keep you from getting too giddy because what they are doing to you feels so good. They give it to

you because what they're about to do is going hurt a lot. You'd think I'd find comfort in the fact that they were going to give me a pain killer, but my experience with that particular drug is that for me, it is about as effective as, say, giving me a shot of Kool Aid. Lidocaine just means the thing they're going to do will hurt and I'm supposed to pretend that the lidocaine made it much better, but in truth it won't help even a little bit. I'd do just as well if they gave me a bullet to bite on.

I had apprehension, fear, about that test. It made me tense, and I really wished I didn't have to have any part of it. There was no sense in which I delighted in that test. So, is that what fearing the Lord is like? Are we to fear he will do something terrible to us, that he is so scary that he is a threat to our well being and maybe even our existence?

The fact that we can fear in him and delight in his commands tells us this is a different kind of fear. It is a fear mixed with delight. In other words, the awesome power and glory that we see in the Lord is kind of terrifying, but also enormously appealing. That might seem like it is impossible, but it is not. I've even seen it.

A few weeks ago Laurie and I took care of Cara and Ella when their parents were out of town. One night we were getting near bed time. Bed time is one of those clear indicators of age. At my age I look forward to bed time. It is highly appealing. For 2 year old Ella it is something to be resisted in every way possible. So this particular night Ella had gone into full on "no bed" mode. How would we get her to accept beginning the bedtime process, starting with brushing teeth, without igniting a major conflagration? Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, I turned into... The Yapaw Monster. This sent Ella running in gleeful terror to Nana for protection. The Yapaw Monster was really scary, who knew what horrifying torture he might inflict on a young child. Fortunately Nana was there to protect her. But what I found interesting was that Ella loved being "scared" like that. When there was a pause in the action she said, "More Yapaw Monster." When the monster showed up again once again she ran in delighted terror to Nana. She loved the little thrill of being scared because she knew that she was never really in any peril. And of course, she was also informed that there was only one thing that could stop the Yapaw Monster, and that was to go upstairs and brush teeth. Brushing teeth stops the Yapaw Monster in his tracks.

This is the kind of fear of the Lord that we are to have. It is kind of spine tingling, it is a bit terrifying, but it is enormously appealing. We should be right there with Ella, saying in delighted terror, "More Yapaw Monster," only in our case it is

“More glory of the Lord.” Remember in Exodus 33 Moses was dealing with the huge stress of leading a bunch of people that made herding cats look simple. He felt utterly inadequate to the task. He asked the Lord to go with him. When God promised he would in Exodus 33:18 Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” The thing that would give him the most hope, the most strength in the middle of huge struggles was to have a glimpse of the glory of the Lord.

I mentioned earlier our stand up paddle boarding venture while on vacation. I’ve done that about 3 times in my life, the last time being somewhat disastrous. I ended up falling, cutting my leg on coral and having the wound get infected. But we tried again. I started out feeling very uncertain, but one thing helped a lot. The tendency is to look down at the board and the water right in front of you, but if you do that, you will almost certainly lose your balance and fall. If you look ahead, off to the horizon, your body maintains its balance and you can stay on the board. Our tendency in life is to keep looking down at the things immediately in front of us, our troubles, our hardships, our fears and anxieties. What helps us is to raise our eyes, keep them focused on the glory of the Lord Jesus. That enables us to stand firm. The most important thing you can do as you work through the ups and downs, the trials and victories of life, the routine and the spectacular, is focus on the glory of the Lord.

We should pray as Moses did. Ask God to show us his glory. Then we should keep our eyes open. We should live with the “More Yapaw Monster” attitude, delighting in being awed by God. That’s why gathering with other believers is so critical for us. One of the ways we can foster that is by continually reminding ourselves of his glory in worship and in singing to him.

I noticed something funny while Laurie and I were on vacation. At the hotel where we stayed they had musicians perform during the evenings and one day during brunch in the morning. That brunch day we walked by the stage area a couple of times and could hear the group performing. A couple of hours later Laurie said to me, “This is really weird, but I’ve got the refrain of some song running through my head and I don’t know why. The words I hear are “let me be there in your morning, let me be there in your night.” I told her I knew exactly why she was hearing that. I had heard that group performing their version of the old Olivia Newton John song, “Let Me Be There.” Laurie never consciously picked up on that song, but it stuck in her head nevertheless. That’s the power music has.

I find myself hearing the songs we've sung on Sunday morning running through my mind during the week. As we sing of God's glory we will be reminded of it as those songs replay and we will be reminded to have that More Yapaw Monster attitude.

DELIGHT IN OUR AWESOME LORD

The final verse of Matthew 16 at first seems puzzling. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 16:28, "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Critics claim this was a prediction that some of the disciples would live until Jesus came back in glory. Of course he was wrong, so this calls into question the possibility of his being divine.

However, there are a number of other interpretations of that saying. It seems to me that Matthew intended it as a lead in to the events at the beginning of chapter 17. Not all of the disciples were on the mountain, only Peter, James and John. Those three witnessed the metamorphosis of Jesus during that brief incident. I believe Matthew intended us to understand that in those brief moments they entered Jesus' glorious, eternal kingdom. They experienced for brief moments a taste of what it will be like.

Here is a wild speculation. I think this is how they knew that the two men who suddenly appeared were Moses and Elijah. I think if you had asked them how they knew the identities of those 2 men they would have said, "I don't know how I knew who they were. I just knew. I recognized them, though I really don't know how I recognized them." I suspect this is a little glimpse into the eternal kingdom. In this kingdom we will know each other. I suspect that we will know people we have never met before. Somehow, we will just know who they are. We will recognize them without ever having met them. Again, I emphasize this is nothing more than speculation. But I wonder if the 3 amigos didn't experience something that only happens in the eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

One thing we can know is that they liked it. Peter blurted out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." In other words, this is great! He then proposed building a camp for Jesus and his visitors. He didn't want anyone to leave. It was great to be there and Peter just wanted to stay. He was seeing, feeling what it is like to live in the kingdom of Christ, and it was the best thing he'd ever known.

Have you experienced moments in your life when it was so wonderful, so touching, so beautiful that you couldn't even express it fully in words, but you

wanted it to never end? You and I will experience that when we finally are in the presence of the Lord in his kingdom. In Philippians 1:21 Paul made that profound comment, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul thought that dying was a big win! In fact he went on in verses 22-23 to say, “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”

If Paul had his choice, he would choose to die because he’d get to be with Jesus. He said that was better than continuing to live. It wasn’t a marginal improvement. He said it was better by far. In other words, it was no contest. Dying and being with Jesus won hands down.

But how did he know this? Maybe he’s just assuming it. Actually he had good reason for believing this. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 he wrote, “I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” In verse 4 he said this man, “was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.” The man he was talking about was himself. Paul was given a glimpse of what it is like in the kingdom of Christ. But what did he mean when he said he wasn’t permitted to tell what he saw?

That sounds like God had a rule. I’m going to give you a glimpse of heaven, Paul, but you can’t tell anybody what you see. So this is like, classified information? Paul could tell you, but then he’d have to kill you? Doesn’t that seem rather strange? Don’t you think God would want people to know about heaven so they’d want to go there? This is like somebody running the best resort in the world, and wanting to make sure no one knows about it. Oh, wait. Maybe there’s a problem. Do you think God didn’t want Paul to say anything because if people knew the truth about the place they wouldn’t want any part of it? It’s not the world’s best resort, it’s a seedy dump that makes the EZ8 motel look like the Ritz Carlton. No, that’s not it. We know that because Paul said after seeing it he much preferred to go there.

I don’t think it is God who didn’t permit Paul to tell what he saw in paradise. I think it is human language that doesn’t permit it. What he saw was so spectacular that there is no way to explain it in human words. One of the things that happened to Laurie and me when we were given a honeymoon in Hawaii is we were captivated by the place. We took lots of pictures of the spectacular scenery. This

was in ancient times when you actually exposed film to light and then had to take the film to be developed. That meant you had no idea what your pictures looked like until well after you'd taken them. We didn't see our pictures until we got home and had them developed. We told everyone about the incredible beauty we'd seen there. Then we got our pictures. What a disappointment. They were fine, and they did show what we'd seen, but they looked dull and bland compared to the real thing. They just could not capture the reality of the beauty. They simply did not do it justice. And that's what Paul meant. Human language did not permit Paul to fully express what he saw and felt. The words don't come close to expressing the glory, the beauty of the place and the feeling of joy Paul experienced there. Like Peter, he said, "it's good to be here."

What this says to us is when we see Jesus, whether it is by him appearing when he returns or by us dying and entering into his presence, we're going to love him. We're going to love being in his kingdom. It is not something we need ever fear. Jesus will never leave us, meaning the moment of our death, he will be right there with us. We will think, "Hey, this is amazing. This is terrific. This is so good I can't even begin to explain it, but man, am I ever glad to be here."

In the meantime, what we should do is love Jesus. Being with him, having him in our lives, is the best thing that could ever happen. And our life as Christians is not a performance, it is not a series of duties, it is not a bunch of exercises or programs, it is simply loving him.

The last day Ella and Cara stayed with us I had to make a run to the grocery store at the end of the day to pick up a few items. Earlier I had asked Ella if she wanted to go to the store with me, and she politely declined. So when the time came I got in the car and headed to the store. I'd gone 2 blocks when my phone rang. It was Laurie. She told me that Ella had broken down into tears because I had left without her. Laurie asked me to come back and take Ella with me. So I made a U turn, went back and found Ella and Laurie waiting on the sidewalk for me. I helped Ella into her car seat and we did the grocery shopping together. I may be the Yapaw Monster, but she loves that Monster. Jesus is the Lord of all. He is glorious, powerful beyond imagining, holy, awesome and terrifying. He's the "Messiah Monster." And the best person ever to be with. Don't leave home without him.

