

Men of Mystery—Men of Impact

Sixth Sunday in Epiphany—February 14, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Mark 9:2-13

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. Then they asked him, ‘Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He said to them, ‘Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.’

Malachi 4:5-6

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

The Bible presents several mysterious people whose lives and works raise all kinds of questions and curiosity. We think of Enoch who was taken from this world without ever having died (Genesis 5:18-24). How did that happen? Or of Melchizedek, the King of Salem who appears suddenly to Abram with bread and wine, and to whom Abram gives a tenth of his belongings (Genesis 14:17-20). Where did he come from? Today we consider one of the great biblical men of mystery as we look at Elijah, the greatest of

the prophets who called down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel, lived a fugitive's life and was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. In the closing verses of the Old Testament the prophet Malachi told of Elijah's return at the Day of the Lord. When and how will that happen? As we look to the New Testament, we find all sorts of rumors surrounding John the Baptist and Elijah. Was John the return of Elijah? These mysteries pose dozens of questions, and in our Gospel lesson we are blessed to hear Jesus sort out this confusion regarding Elijah and John. In our lesson we find an interesting read for the prophecy lover, and for those who are put off by discussions of biblical predictions we also find a very practical lesson on the value of Elijah's and John's ministries. Let's take a look.

Elijah and John are tied together by the prophecy of Malachi, and his prediction has caused no small amount of confusion among God's people. *Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.* Was John really Elijah returned to earth? John did dress in camel's hair and a leather belt much as Elijah did, and he too preached a message of repentance which the leaders of that day rejected. There were many similarities, but John was not Elijah, and in the first chapter of John's Gospel we find him confronted with this question. John flatly stated that he was *not* Elijah.

But what of these predictions of Elijah's return? Was this prophecy fulfilled when Elijah appeared to Jesus, Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration? Or is this to be truly fulfilled just before Jesus' return to judge the earth? One complicating factor is found in the term *the great and terrible day of the Lord*. It was generally believed that when the Christ came, there would then be a great day of judgment. Jesus did come and prove himself to be the long-awaited Christ, but he did not judge the earth at that time. Instead, Jesus ushered in a season of grace when people from all the earth were to be invited into the Kingdom. This age of the Church will someday end, and then Christ shall judge the world. This day which we await is looked to as *the great and terrible day of the Lord*. And yet, in Christ's appearing and his preaching he has already pronounced judgment upon those who persist in opposing God. Did Elijah's appearance at the Transfiguration fulfill Malachi's prophecy, or is he to come again as that great day approaches? Prophecy is seldom a simple matter!

On the way down from the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus is questioned about Elijah's return and his answers begin to set our understandings in order. *Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things.* He goes on to tell them *that Elijah has come*, and he is referring to John and his ministry. John was not Elijah, but he came to fulfill the role of Elijah. One could say that he came in the spirit of Elijah to fulfill the prophecy. Biblical prophecies are not always fulfilled literally, but they often come true in ways not exactly similar to the prediction.

Jesus not only identifies John as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Elijah's return, but he also explains what was involved in this fulfillment. Hear again Jesus' words: *Then they asked him, 'Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things.* Malachi stated that Elijah would return, and Jesus affirmed this, explaining that John had fulfilled this prophecy. Jesus also spoke of Elijah coming *first to restore all things*. This work of restoration was not a prediction from the prophets, but was a teaching advanced by the experts in the law of Jesus' day, and it was a teaching which Jesus endorsed. This raises a natural question: what does it mean *to restore all things*? Not only is the phrase mysterious, but it seems a poor description of John's ministry. During John's time of preaching and baptizing, the corrupt leaders of the Temple and the legalistic Pharisees scorned and rejected all that John did. Not only did the religious leaders stand against John's ministry, but the government leaders did not take kindly to him either, and Herod would have John arrested and eventually beheaded. To say that John restored all things seems like a bad joke, for his ministry seemed to restore nothing! The corrupt status quo appeared to be going as strong as ever.

But look again! John changed Israel more than we can begin to imagine. In that day of corruption and spiritual darkness John preached truth and righteousness, and his witness shone like the sun. Like Elijah, he stood as a righteous witness in a corrupt and dark time. Thousands upon thousands flocked to him to hear God's word and to be baptized, and by this baptism they stated their longing for God and desire to be more like Him. A standard of true righteousness had finally been re-established in Israel, and the nation was now waiting for the Christ to appear. No, John did not restore a true and godly faith to the leaders of the Temple nor to the experts in the law, but he presented Israel with a righteous standard, and in doing so he truly restored all things!

We so easily underestimate the ministry and impact of John as it is easy for us to skim over the pages about John and jump ahead to the life and ministry of Jesus. John gladly admitted that he was only a forerunner of Jesus, and that Jesus was to be the real focus of our attention, but we must not forget the work of John! It was John who truly prepared hearts to receive the Christ. In Luke 7, we find the religious leaders rejecting Jesus, while the poor and even wayward people of Israel were embracing and believing Jesus, and Luke's explanation is plain and profound. Luke tells us that the leaders did not accept Jesus because they did not accept John, and the poor and troubled accepted Jesus because they had accepted and embraced John. John humbled and prepared the people to receive the Christ. We could all benefit from a season of humiliation and preparation, for as we humble ourselves, we become far more receptive to God's guidance and work in our lives. This is why we have solemn and repentant seasons such as Lent. How easily we underestimate the ministry and impact of John!

We also find in Malachi's prophecy an odd prediction. *He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.* Elijah shall come to bridge the generation gap! Again, we ask ourselves just how this was fulfilled. The simplest explanation I know is that repentant parents are better parents. Parents who care little for God are very likely to care little for their young, and parents who are caught up in legalism may also have too little love for the children, for merely focusing upon the law does little to enliven the heart. John's message of repentance was not only to move people to love and honor God, but in doing so, to love and honor each other! Sin damages lives, and it also damages families and those associated with a sinner. Repentance and longing for a loving, righteous life brings healing and joy to all around the repentant soul. John's message, stern as it was, was not intended as a mere scold, but as a word of life. Many heard, and came to know a new and better life. In time they would hear the Good News of Jesus and their lives would forever be changed. John came in the spirit of Elijah, he restored all things, brought people together, and prepared them to receive the Good News of Jesus. The great impact of John's service is quickly overshadowed by the ministry of the Son of God, but it must not be forgotten. Jesus certainly wanted us to remember and cherish John.

We find in this account of the Transfiguration the divine trio of Jesus, Elijah and John. As our Lord descended the mountain, having just spoken with Elijah, he spoke with great fondness of John. In these two prophets Jesus found support and a sense of belonging. Hear again his words to the disciples. *He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.'* Here were three messengers of God, each facing a wayward and corrupt nation. Elijah spoke God's word to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who vigorously sought to kill him, and to a nation which had gone after other gods. John spoke God's truth to common people who would accept it, and to the powerful who wanted nothing to do with it! Herod and Herodias in particular were offended by this truth, and eventually had John killed. Jesus was the Truth, and his ministry was facing increasing opposition. Soon he would suffer and die. In Elijah and in John, Jesus found comfort, knowing that he was not alone in his suffering for the truth of God.

As Jesus speaks of John we find an intense respect and affection. Theirs was an odd relationship. Although they were cousins, they barely knew each other personally, and John seemed confused by the exact nature of Jesus' ministry. John's faith would be challenged as we read in Matthew 11 of him sending questions to Jesus from prison which demonstrated a true crisis of faith for this suffering prophet. Jesus could only speak of John with the very highest of praise. Not only did he admire and praise the

Baptizer's courage and faith, but he looked to John's witness for strength as he realized that he too would soon suffer and die at the hands of wicked men.

Jesus' answers to the disciples' questions just after the Transfiguration cleared up some of the confusion surrounding Elijah and John, but more than that, they spoke a deep admiration for John, and they call us to join our Lord in that admiration. Let us remember John. It is tempting to look upon John as a member of an obsolete ministry. True, John was the last of the Old Testament prophets who would preach God's righteousness and call us to repent. Soon a message of Resurrection and new life by the power of the Holy Spirit would make John's message seem out of style. John was the last of the old order, but his call to repentance presents us with a groundwork and preparation for the Good News which is never obsolete. We need to hear and proclaim this word from John. We need to accept this call to humble repentance, that we might truly embrace the Gospel.

Elijah and John are truly men of mystery, and this mystery is not intended for our idle amusement. These were men of real impact. Their calls to repentance opened hearts to God and to the Good News of salvation, and their message shall not be obsolete until that great and terrible day of the Lord.