

Getting Our Attention – Matthew 17:1-9

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Did you hear about the revival going on in Kentucky?

A days-long chapel service at Asbury University in Wilmore was still ongoing this past Monday.

According to WKYT, it began on Wednesday, Feb. 8, and, on Monday, Feb. 13, it was still going. Prayers, praise, worship music and testimonies - all of it, people say, a movement they themselves could not have started.

The service is being described as a revival, “a movement that only God could orchestrate and keep going.”

What began with students at a chapel service has blossomed and grown to include people from all over the country. People from as far away as Oregon have heard about this and are showing up to sing, raise their hands in praise or kneel down to pray.

It's hard to describe why this is happening or what has caused a simple prayer service to go on and on and on. However, people say the reason is very simple yet profound.

“We would say there is just a spirit of the Lord in this place. Really, it has browed its way into the hearts and minds of our students, staff, faculty and our community,” said Dr. Kevin Brown, president of Asbury University.

Maybe somebody is trying to get somebody's attention.

Speaking of that, what do you make of this series of objects that have been hovering over the U.S. in recent weeks? First, there was the Chinese spy balloon that floated over the country before being shot down by the U.S. military. Then, there were a series of objects—some of them cylindrical and some octagon-shaped—that were also shot down by the military.

From Alaska to Lake Huron, these objects have been destroyed without knowing yet what their origins are, their purpose, their size, and their propulsion.

According to General Glen Van Herk, commander for NORAD and the U.S. Northern Command, when asked if officials had ruled out extraterrestrials, he said, "I haven't ruled out anything at this point."

Is somebody trying to get our attention?

You've heard of people getting sick with some illness that turns out to be rather minor, but in the course of getting checked out by a doctor, discover a far more serious illness going on inside of them? If not for that initial visit, a larger issue would've gone undetected and could very well have cost them their life.

In those moments, when we are forced to slow down and change our way of living, we wonder if somebody was trying to get our attention.

Let's imagine for a moment that we were with Jesus, Peter, James, and John on this day when they ascended up a high mountain. In their presence, Jesus has already fed the 5,000, walked on water, and predicted his death...all acts that would've gotten their attention.

And now, they trek up to what's most likely the top of Mount Hermon or Mount Tabor. And they have no idea what's going to happen when they get there. Although, history has shown they probably should've come to expect the unexpected.

Sure enough, an amazing thing happens. Jesus is changed—the churchy word is "transfigured." His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

And then, Moses and Elijah appeared.

Now, that's enough to freak one out right there. It'd be like an extraterrestrial showing up right in front of you. An attention-grabber for sure.

It would've been normal if Peter and the boys had run back down the mountain in fear and trembling. Even after all that miracle feeding and water-walking, now there's this crazy, unbelievable changing of Jesus that takes place. What is happening here? Scared out of their wits is probably their emotion.

This moment, though, took Peter to a different place—a place of relative calm and steely commitment.

"Lord," he says, "it is good for us to be here." Peter wants to live in the mountaintop moment. By now, these moments are right in his wheelhouse. The craziness of it all, the disbelief, the fear—no, he's not scared. Instead, he seems to use this moment as a way to validate his commitment to Jesus.

"If you wish," he says, "I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." There's no going anywhere for Peter. Instead, he's all about doing whatever he can to serve.

More weirdness follows from there: a bright cloud overshadowed all of them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well-pleased. Listen to him."

Now, this was more than any of them could take. It was over-the-top weird, this voice coming out of a bright cloud. They, including Peter even, fall to the ground in fear according to Matthew. And Jesus comes over and touches them and tells them not to be afraid.

And when they look up, Moses and Elijah are gone; only Jesus remains.

Whoa! What a story. What an attention-grabber!

We can reasonably conclude that Jesus was in the business of doing big things in big moments—not for self-glorification. And not primarily to improve people's earthly lives (although, feeding, healing and performing other miracles certainly accomplish that).

Jesus did big things to help people see and understand who he was. He's a life-changer, a difference-maker, a chain-breaker, if you will.

Christian singer Zach Williams speaks of this in his song by the same name, Chainbreaker. He writes:

If you've got pain, He's a pain taker. If you feel lost, He's a way maker.

If you need freedom or saving, He's a prison-shaking Savior.

If you've got chains, He's a chain breaker.

That's what all these attention-grabbing works of his were meant to do: point us to that reality. He's a pain-taker, way-maker, chain breaker, and prison-shaking Savior.

What are the attention-grabbing moments in our lives? Where do we stand a better-than-average chance of encountering the living God?

No one, of course, can dictate where God's going to show up — the spirit-wind "blows where it chooses," as Jesus taught Nicodemus (John 3:8). Even so, there are certain things we can do to position ourselves in the right place at the right time. Today — here on the threshold of Lent — is a good time to think about these things because of the various commitments we can choose to adopt as part of our Lenten discipline.

For starters, we can *pray*. This is more than the hurried grace before dinner, the sleepy-eyed bedtime prayer, or the swift request beamed to God in a moment of spiritual panic. The only way for God to get our attention in prayer is to practice a patient, contemplative kind of prayer. Such prayer is more watchful waiting than conscious thought, more silence than speech. And yes, it does require a block of dedicated time.

Another way of God getting our attention is by our *reading the Bible*. Again, this requires dedicated time, not a few seconds here and there amidst the frantic multitasking of our days. There are ways of reading carefully chosen Bible passages devotionally, ways that allow us as readers to brood over the text, attuned to what God the Holy Spirit is trying to say to us.

Still another way by which God gets our attention is by our *attending worship regularly*. Now that suggestion may sound painfully obvious for any preacher to say, but there's truth in it, all the same. You can't count on sensing the presence of the Lord in worship every Sunday, but it does happen to a great many of us with some regularity. Why else would people come to church if it weren't for such an expectation?

Some leading historical figures of the faith received their most cherished insight in a service of worship. For example, the young Isaiah was worshiping in the Temple when he had that ecstatic vision of the angel holding the burning coal, and of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8).

God uniquely got Isaiah's attention within the context of worship.

In our worship starting next Sunday, the first Sunday in Lent, our theme is going to be "Seeking: Honest Questions for Honest Faith." And we're going to lift up the act of seeking as a way to put ourselves in a position for God to somehow get our attention.

Through prayer, Scripture reading and worship — ordinary spiritual disciplines — we can open our hearts to whatever God is ready to do with us. Once again, we should emphasize that no spiritual seeker can summon the Holy Spirit at will. You can't *make* yourself have a spiritual experience. Only God can see to that. Yet — to adapt a state lottery advertising slogan to a more sacred purpose — "you can't win if you don't play."

And playing in this case means opening our hearts to the possibility that God just might be up to something.

I travel on Northshore Drive every day now, because I live off Northshore in the Choto area. And if there's one thing that's been reinforced to me over these last six months or so, it's that you have to pay attention when you're driving on Northshore. Not that you can get away without paying attention when you're driving on other roads around town. It's just that Northshore gives you far less room for error than other roadways.

First of all, you have to pay attention to the road on Northshore because there is no prettier drive around in the early mornings than Northshore. Its beauty can be distracting. You can see the sun coming up over the water on both sides of the road. Some days, it's the steam rising off the water on a cold morning. With the trees on the shoreline added to it, along with the homes that litter the lakeside, it's a gorgeous view of God's creation no matter the weather.

Secondly, you have to pay attention to the wildlife on Northshore. There are skunks galore—both living and deceased that litter the road. I've also seen a fair number of deer on my end of Northshore that get my attention.

And then, there's just random things that happen on Northshore all the time—school buses picking up and dropping off kids, tractors carrying bales of hay and going slow, buses with Christmas carolers nearly turning over on the side of the road (as happened to a group of us FPC-ers several years ago). And then there's my favorite: One day, traffic was nearly stopped. We were crawling along, everybody no doubt wondering what the hold-up was. Turns out, a woman was parked alongside the road and was out chasing her dog who had somehow gotten out of her vehicle. She

was dodging cars in hot pursuit of her pup, and the vehicles, thankfully, were very considerate in making sure her pet didn't get hit.

Most likely, something or somebody is going to get your attention every day on Northshore Drive. But you have to be looking for the sunrises, the skunks, the tractors, the loose dogs, the deer. Only then, will they have your attention.

So, too, must we be aware of what God might be doing when he leads us to a mountaintop like Jesus did with Peter, James, and John. Something incredible may happen if our eyes and hearts are open to seeing it.