

2 March 2003
The Transfiguration of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Cross or Glory? Yes!”

Text: Mark 9:2-9 (2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; 2 Kings 2:1-12)

(Thanks to the Rev. David Peterson of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Ft. Wayne, IN for some of his thoughts concerning Moses and Elijah that are contained in this sermon.)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord. When, for just a short time and to a very limited audience, Jesus’ divine nature as the Son of God was unveiled and the radiance of His glory allowed to shine forth. And as if that weren’t enough, Peter, James, and John – to quote a recent movie – began to “see dead people.” Moses and Elijah, standing there with Jesus and talking with Him. And they were terrified. Who could blame them? And then a cloud descends upon them – I wonder if they could see it coming? Closer and closer . . . and this cloud envelopes them, and they hear a voice, **“This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.”** To those frightened disciples, it must have seemed as if this was the place where Heaven and earth touched! How else to explain what was unfolding before their very eyes? . . . But no sooner had it all begun that it all went away. The glory, the dead people, the cloud, the voice – gone! **“And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.”** And they go back down the mountain. Back to the ordinary world. Back to the struggles and opposition.

And make no mistake about it – soon, very soon, the disciples would face great struggle, as the very opposite of the Transfiguration would also unfold before their very eyes, as they follow Jesus not up onto a mountain of glory, but to the cross. Where instead of Moses and Elijah talking with Him, He would have two criminals hanging with Him. Where instead of a cloud, great darkness would overshadow them. Where instead of the voice of the Father, the voices of Satan would taunt and jeer. And if the Mount of Transfiguration seemed like the place where Heaven and earth touched, then the Mount of Calvary must have seemed like the place where earth and hell came together! . . . And then Jesus bowed His head in death, and was gone. And they were again terrified. Who could blame them?

It must have been a very confusing time for the disciples. Will the real Jesus please stand up? Is Jesus the Jesus of the Mount of Transfiguration? The Jesus of glory and Heavenly conversation and Fatherly approval? Or is Jesus the Jesus of the Mount of Calvary? The Jesus of crucifixion and humiliation and mocking and Fatherly abandonment? How do you make sense of two such starkly contrasting pictures?

But to be honest, is that not the problem we have today too? There are times in our life when Jesus seems like the Jesus of the Mount of Transfiguration. Life is going well, we are receiving blessings and joys, your devotional life is strong – things are, well, glorious. And yet how quickly that can come to an end. And things seem to turn the other way. Problems arise, difficulties, struggles, prayer and devotion are hard to come by, you seem dried up and worn out – it seems as if we have been abandoned. . . . And you can start to wonder: Is this what the Christian life is supposed to be like? Why such ups and downs? Why one moment good and glorious, and the next such struggle and doubt? . . . Like the disciples, how can we make sense of two such starkly contrasting pictures?

Well, perhaps Moses and Elijah can help us here, and provide some hope for us, because they went through the same things as well. They were undoubtedly two of the greatest figures in the Old Testament, and yet how weak and confused they were too. For consider Moses. He had run away from God and from His people. He committed murder and was afraid for his own skin. Down. But God restored him and raised him even to be His ambassador and lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. And what glory he experienced, as they moved from death to life! Out of Egypt, through the crushing waters of the Red Sea, led through the wilderness, meeting with God in the Tabernacle! Good! . . . But not all was glorious. They then struggled too. And when Moses' anger got the better of him in the wilderness, he was told that he would not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. A whole generation had to die in the wilderness, and Moses too. And just when he arrived at the doorstep, just when he could see it and taste it and smell it, suddenly it was gone.

And Elijah, too. He too ran and hid. Often times. Down. Yet God restored him and raised him to be His ambassador and lead His people from their slavery to false gods. And so God provided for Elijah through famine and drought. Elijah witnessed the glory of God on Mount Carmel, when the four hundred prophets of Baal were defeated when fire came down from Heaven and consumed his sacrifice. Good! And yet even after that his fear got the best of him, and he ran and wallowed in self-pity and doubt in a cave, convinced he was the only one left. . . . And doesn't it seem – for both Moses and Elijah – that just as God provided glory and victory, suddenly, it was gone?

So will the real God please stand up? Which is it going to be? Glory or suffering? Hope

or fear? Up or down? Good or struggle? Heaven or hell? Transfiguration or crucifixion? The answer is: **yes!**

You see, that *very question* is, in fact, what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about and discussing there on the Mount of Transfiguration. St. Luke tells us plainly – they were talking about Jesus’ *Exodus*. His departure from this world, in – get this! – His **glorious crucifixion!** Is that not an oxymoron? Is that not the ultimate confusion? The awfulness of crucifixion called glorious? . . . *It is for anyone except Jesus*. For while for man crucifixion is shameful, for Jesus it is glorious! It is what He has come to do. It is all that Heaven is interested in and constantly talking about and praising – the Lamb of God who offered Himself for the sin of the world. The shameful death of Jesus is their glory! It is the fulfillment of all that Moses and Elijah prophesied. And so what looked shameful and humiliating to the world, was actually glorious. For not Christ incarnate, but Christ crucified, is the Desire of Nations, the Hope of Israel, the Light of the World. And so the cross by itself is simply an instrument of death and destruction and shame and humiliation. But put God on that cross, and it is glorious! It is a **glorious crucifixion!**

And so it is with the cross in our lives. Apart from Christ, the crosses upon us, the suffering and difficulty, is something to be avoided at all costs! But with Christ, they are glorious. And that is not an oxymoron! Rather, it is what St. Paul was writing of in the Epistle when he said that **“through Christ the veil is taken away.”** For it is only through Christ that we can see the reason and purpose and *glory* of the cross. And in this way, *through the cross*, **“we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”** And so it is through the Mount of Calvary that we reach the Mount of Transfiguration. It is not one or the other – it is both. The cross must kill the sin in us – the slavery, the lust, the selfishness, the anger, the hatred, the love of the things of this world, the wisdom in us that thinks we can improve ourselves apart from the cross! That must all be slain and killed, so that Christ can raise us up with Himself, from death to life, into the glory of Heaven.

And so He did with Moses and Elijah. **Moses** was not permitted to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, but when he awoke from death he was in the Promised Land – the Promised Land of Heaven. He awoke free from his sin and fear, and free even from himself! He lived his life of sorrow by faith, in suffering, with hardship and uncertainty. But in the end came to faith’s reward. In his weakness he learned to know that there is no other place to turn. That God is his only hope. And knowing that, in weakness he was strong, and in death he now lives. . . . **And also Elijah**. He too lived a life of sorrows, disappointments, and frustration, in a small, struggling Church. He hid and wondered. And yet in the end, he was taken to Heaven in a chariot of fire! And what his faith could not do, God did. . . . **And so it will be** for Peter, James, and John, and you and me. We

struggle under the cross now, we wonder and are often frightened and confused, we look for easy answers and the easy way out – anything and everything but facing death and the cross! But our Saviour says, no. Repent of that false belief. Your flesh is weak. Your wisdom is nothing. Your will as fickle as the wind. You cannot do it. Repent. Do not be scandalized by the cross, but see its glory. Do not lose heart, but know that with Christ, the cross that you bear is a **glorious crucifixion!** And that in the end, you will receive faith's reward. For if you have been crucified with Christ, you will certainly also be raised with Christ in His resurrection.

And so we live constantly in this tension of cross and resurrection, of dying and rising, of **glorious crucifixion**. And nowhere more than here, in the Divine Service, the place where Heaven and earth meet for us. For around the altar of our Lord, He is here for us with all those who have gone before us. Here the voice of God speaks to us through His Word. *Here is our Mount of Transfiguration*, and yet here we cannot stay. Rather, fed and strengthened by our Lord, we go down – back out into the world, back out into the struggle and the opposition. . . . And today especially, we go down and enter into the season of Lent. Our glorious white paraments will turn purple. We sing farewell to “alleluia” in our closing hymn and will not sing it again until Easter. No more hymn of praise. A season of repentance and self-denial. . . . Yet we know the struggle is glorious. The world may mock and jeer, but by faith we **see** what the world cannot see; we **know** what the world does not know; we **believe** what they world cannot believe – that the cross is not simply a cross with Christ upon it! But it has been changed, from an instrument of death to an instrument of life. From shame to glory. From the end to the beginning.

And so as in Heaven, so here on earth: **we glory in the cross**. It is all that we are interested in and constantly talking about and praising – the Lamb of God who offered Himself for the sin of the world. The shameful death of Jesus is our glory! We preach Christ crucified! He is our Desire, our Hope, our Forgiveness, our Light and our Life. Until that day when we join Moses and Elijah and all the saints at Jesus side. We do so now, already, at this Table, under the cross. But we will do so then in glory. When what is now hidden will then be made plain. And best of all, we will never have to leave!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.