

26 February 2017
The Transfiguration of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Transfigured by the Cross”

Text: Matthew 17:1-9; 2 Peter 1:16-21

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

John looked up. He never thought he'd see Jesus like this. Never in a million years. And the two people with Him . . . incredible. What were they saying? It was hard to hear, to make out the words. The vision, what they were seeing, overwhelmed the words. It was almost too much. Sensory overload. And the fear. They were terrified. And then John made out some of the words, what was being said. He would never forget those amazing words: *Father, forgive them. Today, you will be with me in Paradise. It is finished.* And then it was. Finished. Over. Jesus was gone. He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit.

Um, Pastor? It's not Good Friday - it's the Feast of the Transfiguration! It's not the day of Jesus dead but the day of Jesus in His glory. I think maybe you pulled out the wrong sermon!

But here's the thing: *the two are not so different.* A Mount of Transfiguration, a Mount of Calvary. Two people with Jesus in both. And in fact, you cannot understand the one without the other. That's why Jesus said to Peter, James, and John as they were coming down the mountain after His transfiguration: ***Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.*** For until then, people wouldn't understand. Just like Peter, James, and John didn't understand. They wanted to make three tents and stay there. Peter is the one who suggested it, but you could imagine James and John silently nodding their heads in agreement at this good idea.

But no. This is not why Jesus came. He would not stay here. He would go to and stay on the cross. That's the glory He wanted. Not the glory of the Transfiguration. Not the glorious spectacle of jumping down from the cross, as His opponents challenged Him to do and so prove who He was. The glory we want and want to see. Not Jesus. His glory would be in suffering and dying. His glory would be to be bathed in His own blood. His glory would be for the glorious one to die for sinners, that inglorious sinners might live in His glory forever.

So it's important that we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus on the eve of entering the Lenten season. It is good that we will put away our Alleluias now until our celebration of ***the Son of Man rising from the dead*** on Easter. For it is important for us to know that

the *real* transfiguration of Jesus isn't really what happened with Moses and Elijah on the mountain that day - that's who Jesus is and has been all along. *God of God and Light of Light* (Nicene Creed and LSB #810) in human flesh. He just showed it, revealed it, for a moment there. No, His *real* transfiguration was what happened when Jesus was hanging around not with Moses and Elijah, but *with two criminals* on either side of Him. When *He who knew no sin became sin for us* (2 Cor 5:21). When the glorious, sinless Son of God became sin for us. When He became the worst and most inglorious sinner of all time for us. So *that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God*. So that in Him, our sins be forgiven, and we be transfigured too - from shame to glory. From sinner to saint. From death to life.

You see, Peter, James, and John's mistake wasn't that they wanted to stay with Jesus in His glory - Jesus wanted that too! And that's why He came. For that very thing. For that very life. It's just that they wanted it too soon. And they didn't understand that it would come only through the cross, only through blood, only through death. Only through those things that are the very opposite of glory.

And that's the mistake, honestly, that we often make as well. For if given the choice of the Mount of Transfiguration or Mount Calvary, the Mount of glory or the Mount of suffering and death, which would you choose? It sounds silly even asking the question. For what do we want our lives to be more like: *Transfiguration or Calvary*? What do we want our homes to be more like? What do we want our church to be more like? We want Transfiguration! But we get Calvary.

And just like with Peter, James, and John, wanting transfiguration, that's not wrong. It's okay to want that. The danger, though, is if we then think that because our life is more like Calvary than Transfiguration - more suffering than glory, more sickness than health, more blood than ease, more struggle than victory - that we then begin to question God, question His goodness, question His ways, question His love, question His promises. That we then begin to doubt and fear and wonder if God is really my God, and for me, at all?

That's what Satan wants, after all. To use the cross God used to save us to destroy us and our faith. That's why when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (as we'll hear next week), he kept saying: *If you are the Son of God . . . IF*. And why when Jesus was on the cross Satan kept saying through Jesus' opponents: *If you are the Son of God . . . IF*. And why Satan keeps suggesting to us: *If you are a child of God . . . IF . . .* then why so much trouble in your life? Why so much struggle? Why so much sin? Where is Jesus and His glory *for you*?

Satan wants to blind us with glory, with this kind of glory, promised glory, future glory, now, to take our eyes off the glory of the cross.

But against that, to protect us from that, we have the Word of God. The Word which Peter said is *more sure* than the glory and majesty that they saw that day. The Word which, he says, we would *do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place*. In those dark places and dark times of our lives that satan uses to try to pull us away from Christ, to try to pull our faith down, to try to ensnare us in doubt and fear. To convince us that a God on a cross isn't much of a God at all.

That *more sure* Word sounded forth that day from the bright cloud that overshadowed them all and said: *This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased*. We began this Epiphany season hearing those same words at Jesus' Baptism - now the Father says them again. No matter what happens, no matter what you see, this is the truth. But now, these words are added too: *Listen to Him*. Listen to Him, not satan, who is trying to deceive you. Listen to Him, not the world, which thinks it knows better. Listen to Him, and not your doubts and fears. Listen to Him. And when you do, this is what you will hear:

Rise, and have no fear.
Father, forgive them.
Today, you will be with me in Paradise.
It is finished.
I baptize you.
I forgive you.
This is My Body, this is My Blood.

Those are the glorious words that come only through the cross. Outside the cross we should fear, for our sins are still on us. Outside the cross we have no forgiveness. Outside the cross Paradise is locked. Outside the cross your salvation is not finished, but up to you. Outside the cross Baptism is just plain water, the Absolution just wishful thinking, and the Supper just bread and wine. Outside the cross, these things are not glorious. Outside the cross, Jesus' Transfiguration is His but not for you.

But with the cross, with the glorious one on the cross and then risen from the dead, these things are glorious, and give us glory. The glory of Jesus. The glory He came to provide not just for three select disciples, but for you and me and every person in the world. The glory He created us to have, that we lost in sin, but is given to us again. A glory to live in forever.

Which is what John saw when he looked up a few years later, when he was an old man living in exile on the island of Patmos. He wrote that vision down in the book of Revelation. When he saw *a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb* (Revelation 7:9). A multitude which included Moses and Elijah, Peter and James, and that criminal that once hung on a cross next to Jesus. And which includes you and me. For that picture John saw was not a snapshot of a moment in time, but of all

time. The vision of what Jesus came to provide through His cross. The glorious future that includes you. You who are baptized. You who do not just die, but die and rise with Christ. You who are absolved. You who here feast on the crucified and risen Body and Blood of your glorious Saviour.

So when things are not all glorious for you here and now, when the struggle is long and battle get tough, look up. Look up and see your Saviour on the cross for you. Look up and see what a glorious God you have, who would do that for you. Who would take your sin from you. Who would take the curse for you. Who would die for you, to pull you up and out of the grave with Him to life. And to glory. To glory He has come to prepare for you and prepare you for.

And as we enter the season of Lent on Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, that is what we'll do. We'll look up and we'll listen. We'll see the cross and hear of its glory. We'll look at the cross and see our salvation. We'll look up from the dust and ashes of our sin and see the hope, the glory, and the future that awaits us. We'll hear and rejoice. Rejoice that we have a Saviour who didn't stay in His glory, but came down for us. That He who was transfigured transfigure us. And not just for a moment, but forever.

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

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