

THE TRANSFIGURATION, HIS AND OURS - FEB. 27

Matthew 17:1-9

Scripture Readings

Exodus 24:12,15-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Hymns

135, 719, 192 (1-2,7-8), 651

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

May you be given the faith and the wisdom to recognize both the power and the love of God our Father, of his Holy Spirit, and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

The text for our consideration this morning reveals to us the event we celebrate on this day, the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ. That great event is found recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the Seventeenth Chapter:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

So far the very words of God. Concerning this very Word of God the Apostle Peter said that we would "***do well to pay attention as to a light shining in a dark place.***" We therefore focus our attention on these verbally inspired words from our God as we also pray, "***Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.***" Amen.

Let's begin with a question. What did you get out of the reading of the text for this morning? Anything at all, or did you hear or read it with just sort of a numb sense of comfortable religiosity? This is admittedly something of an abrupt question, but sometimes it takes that to wake us from our spiritual lethargy.

The sad fact is we need to engage in a relentless struggle to avoid becoming lazy and complacent in our faith life.

When sinful human beings encounter the vast panorama of God's Word they actually see very little of what is really there. Even those who trip lightly across the surface routinely come to imagine that what they have witnessed is really of very little practical value. Oh the writing is pretty good (in their humble estimation) and there are contained therein some solid little bits of moralizing, but all in all the Bible is to them an over-hyped piece of real estate.

The real problem is that man has no idea what untold wealth lies just below the surface of God's Holy Word. What is more, all men from birth lack both the vision to recognize the potential and the tools to extract all of those divine riches. The result is a pure and catastrophic waste on a scale un-imagined by humankind. How can anyone put a price tag on that which rescues us from an eternity in hell and carries us instead to an unimaginably blissful paradise that never ends? How can anyone accurately evaluate that which not only saves us, but which is designed also to comfort, encourage, and protect us? The unparalleled wealth given to us by our gracious and merciful God will forever remain hidden from the unbelieving world, unless and until they are taught to extract it.

We share much with the unbelieving world, don't we? We too miss out on so much of what our Lord would lavish upon us simply because we are lazy. We skim past, flip through, pass over great riches that are just lying there, waiting for us to pick them up and make them our own. Digging out the answers to these sorts of questions is what makes the Scriptures come alive, and it is how we learn, grow, and are strengthened for the work and the battles that lie ahead.

All of which sounds good, but what does it really mean? In connection with this morning's text, it means that we are supposed to listen and read with the understanding that God's Word always represents a treasure that is to be mined. To do so, we sometimes need to tear it apart and reassemble it. In more practical terms, it means that we should, upon hearing the words of this particular text, ask (and then answer) questions like, "*What does it mean to be transfigured? What does it mean that Jesus was transfigured? Why was Jesus transfigured? What were Moses*

and Elijah doing there, and why did Jesus first invite Peter, James, and John to witness these sublime sights, and then tell them (at least for the time being) to keep the event to themselves?”

To be transfigured means, literally, to be changed, usually on the outside and usually for the better—but that bit of information really doesn't help us much. We already pretty much figured that out from a simple reading of the text. That which was witnessed here in Jesus was infinitely more than just a brief, outward glowing. In fact the Greek word here describing what took place in Jesus was carried nearly intact into the English as *metamorphosis*. What those three privileged apostles were fortunate enough to witness was a glimpse of Jesus with his divine glory shining through. They were seeing the majesty that Jesus always possessed, but now it was attached to and permeated the human body that he had taken on.

The vision absolutely transfixed Peter, James, and John, it was that sublime. We miss a key component of this text—indeed this entire *event*—if we fail to pause for a bit to take this in. The magnificence that these men here witnessed defied description, but our inspired text did what it could, given the bounds of human communication: ***“His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light.”*** Hold that thought, that image, for just a bit because we are going to come back to it.

Why was Jesus transfigured? This happened both for Jesus and for you and me. When we hear that it is Transfiguration Sunday, we immediately ought to recognize that we once again stand at the door of Lent. The event provided Jesus with a special strengthening just before he undertook the final leg of his great and incomparable journey of humiliation and self-sacrifice. That journey carried him from the womb of Mary to the cross of Calvary. The Transfiguration undoubtedly therefore served as a great spiritual boost before Jesus had to suffer the terrors of Good Friday, before he had to bear the punishment for the sum total of every sin ever committed by mankind.

What then are we supposed to learn from the fact that it was Moses and Elijah who spoke to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration? Moses was the giver of the Law; Elijah was arguably the greatest of the prophets. In Moses and Elijah then we have a representation of ***“the Law and the Prophets,”*** referred to on more than one occasion by Jesus himself. So also we read in Luke 16:16, ***“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.”*** Paul also picked up the expression, since we read

in Romans 3:21, ***“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”***

The day of Moses and Elijah, those who symbolized ***“the law and the Prophets,”*** was rapidly coming to a close. A new order, a new covenant, was being established. The Old was passing off to the New. In this we recognize that the Law and the Prophets have given way to Jesus Christ. What does that mean, personally, to you and me? It means that the Old Covenant, with all of its demands and condemnations, has given way to the New Covenant. This New Covenant says simply: ***“Your sins are forgiven. Gone—every single one of your sins. Jesus has paid for them. Salvation is yours, you are reconciled to God.”***

Again, don't hold these promises from our God at arm's length. Draw them into your heart and make them both real and personal. Don't just hear that your sins are forgiven in general terms. Think of a sin that you committed this past week. That very sin is included in what we are talking about here. That sin has been forgiven. Think now of a very big and very black sin from your past—a sin that still makes you blush to think that you were capable of such lawlessness or perversion. That, too, is the sin that has been forgiven.

Why did Jesus invite Peter, James, and John to witness this event? To serve later as witnesses, certainly, but the Apostles (who spent about three years at the Savior's side) had to face a problem unique to their situation. Because of their physical, day to day contact with the man Jesus, it must have been difficult for them to recognize, moment by moment, that Jesus was both true man *and true God*. How difficult it must have been for them to remember, having seen Jesus eat, sleep, cry, and all the rest—how difficult to remember that in *that man “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”* But not after this—not after they witnessed the Transfiguration. Never again would these three men forget that Jesus was more than just true man. Through their witness we today can never forget that the man Jesus, who was nailed to the cross, was also ***“very God of very God, begotten, not made. Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”*** (Words from the Nicene Creed) What a fitting reminder, as we enter the season of Lent, that it was *God himself* who offered his life for man.

The next very personal application of this section of God's Word is the fact that this very Son of God is the one who died for *my* sins and even today serves as *my* intercessor at the Father's right hand. The Bible tells us that ***“if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*** (1 John 2:1) While on earth, Jesus set aside the glory that was his, along with the full use of

his power. Here we are given a brief glimpse of the power and majesty that are his. Through the eyes of Peter, James and John we see Jesus *as he is now*. Jesus himself told us, after his resurrection, “**All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth...**” (Matthew 28:18) The great news for you and me in all of this is that this is the same Jesus who intercedes for you and me right at this very moment. Such a God can do for us whatever is best for us. Wouldn't it be wise to remember this picture of Jesus' shining in power and glory when we are tried and tested here in time? Next time a problem confronts you—a regular Gordian Knot whopper of a problem—look not to the Jesus lying helpless in the manger, nor even to the cadaverous Jesus dragging his own cross through the streets of Jerusalem. Look to the Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and there recognize the power he now wields—the power he has promised to use in your behalf. Shall not such a God be able to accomplish for you whatever is best for your soul?

When Peter, James, and John had seen and experienced the great glory of the Savior on that Transfiguration Hill, they wanted to stay right there—the sight was that spectacular. Peter offered to build homes for everyone right there on the spot. Jesus would have none of it—not from Peter and certainly not from us. Souls are being strengthened here in this church building, but souls are dying out there, and each one of us has the medicine, the unique remedy, they need to escape an eternity in hell. Our Lord Jesus wants us to expend the same effort at reaching others that we would want others to expend in bringing us the Words of life. Transfiguration tells us, “*You've met with the Lord, now go and tell your neighbor what you've seen.*”

Our God knows full well that the job he gave us to do would not be easy, so he left us with something to lighten our step as we walk the long path toward home. You will recall that you were supposed to hold that vision of Jesus in your mind's eye, and that we would return to it later. We return to that thought now, and here is the reason—given to us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (3:20-21): “***But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.***” Do you recall that splendid vision of Jesus as he was transfigured? Because of what that same Jesus has done for you and me, one day soon that same sort of glorified body will be ours. God's Word promises that our bodies will also be transfigured. What an incredible promise—absolutely beyond imagination—yet altogether true, for our Savior-God has promised.

Thanks and praise be to God, who gives such great gifts, and such great promises, to men. Let this be a part of the joy that gladdens your heart on the long journey home. Amen.

—**Pastor Michael Roehl**

St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church
Bismarck, ND