

St Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday – February 11th and 14th, 2010

Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen.

In the name of Christ Jesus, dear friends:

If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, you probably know that the words printed in red-type are words spoken by Jesus. As you page through the four gospels, you can see entire chapters in red — the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus' parables and discourses during Holy Week (Mt. 21-25) and Jesus' final words for his disciples in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday (John 13-17).

But did you know that in these special Bibles some words spoken by God are not printed in red? It is not because some words are less important than others. It is not because they have little value for our lives today. And it is not because the printing company made a mistake. Some words of God are not printed in red because they come from the mouth of God the Father, not God the Son.

The text before us this morning contains one of those rare passages in the New Testament where God the Father speaks. What God says doesn't have to be printed in a certain color or underlined and highlighted in our Bibles in order for us to appreciate its significance. As we ascend the mountain of transfiguration today, God speaks to us through his Word. Listen to him and learn from him as you ponder his words. The Father declares,

Sermon Theme: This Is My Son!

- 1. See His glory**
- 2. Remember His mission**
- 3. Listen to His Word**

Jesus' transfiguration was an extraordinary event, but it began in a rather ordinary way. Jesus went up on a mountain to pray. He had done the same thing dozens, probably hundreds of times before. A mountainside offered a quiet refuge, a place where he could talk with his Father one-on-one, a place where there would be no distractions, no questions, no requests for help.

Jesus took with him three of his disciples, Peter, James and John. The disciples were Jesus' followers, but they were also his friends. And Peter, James and John were special. They formed an inner circle around Jesus. Only these three disciples were allowed to follow Jesus when he raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead. When he needed strength and support the most, Jesus chose these three men to watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. For over thirty years, Jesus had walked on the earth as a human being. For thirty years, Jesus had set aside the divine power and glory that was rightfully his. For three of those years, Jesus' disciples walked with him. They traveled together. They ate together. They prayed together. When people saw them, Jesus and his disciples probably looked very much the same, until now.

In this transfiguration account, the gospel writers are given an almost impossible task. They are supposed to describe the glory of God in words. Luke writes: "**As he (Jesus) was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning**" (29). Matthew says that Jesus' face "**shone like the sun, and his clothes became as bright as the light**" (Mt 17:2). Mark reports that Jesus' clothes "**became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them**" (Mk 9:3). Mere words can never do justice to what the disciples saw, but even the gospel writers' struggle to explain the unexplainable can help us appreciate that glorious sight. For a moment, Jesus the man revealed himself as true God. Jesus allowed his disciples to catch a glimpse of his glory.

As amazing as that was, Jesus was not the only glorious figure the disciples saw. "**Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus**" (30,31). Peter, James and John were Jews. Therefore, they were probably familiar with the Old Testament. They knew about Moses, the shepherd to whom God had appeared in a burning bush, the commander who took on Pharaoh and his armies, the leader who brought Israel out of Egypt, the prophet who received God's law on Mount Sinai.

And the disciples knew about the great prophet Elijah, how he raised a widow's son from the dead, he put his trust in the Lord when he challenged the prophets of Baal, how the Lord carried him up into heaven in a fiery chariot before he tasted death. From little on, the disciples had heard these stories. They had grown up with these heroes of faith. And now, without any warning, Moses and Elijah were standing right in front of them. They appeared glorious splendor. They were talking with Jesus. And when the disciples finally woke up, they witnessed this awesome display.

When the disciples saw Jesus, they were afraid. They were afraid of his glory. And if we had been there, we probably would have been scared too. But the transfiguration, this vision of God's glory, can also be a source of comfort for us. The transfiguration reminds us that Jesus is true God. It reminds us that the glory that belongs to God will be ours. It reminds us that our ascended Lord will return and "**transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body**" (Ph 3:21). Imagine the brightest white you have ever seen...whiter than a new white shirt when you take out of the package...whiter than the sun when it reflects off new snow...brighter than a flash of lightning that does not go away. All of these things are nothing compared to the glory that awaits us in heaven.

As we stand on the mountain of glory, it is important that we do not let this glory blind us. Before we talk about heaven, we need to remember why Jesus came to earth. Whenever we talk about Jesus' transfiguration, we must also remember his mission.

2. Remember His mission

Luke lets us in on the content of Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah. "**They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem**" (31). When Moses and Elijah were alive, they put their trust in the Savior who was to come. They understood that God's promises would find their final fulfillment in Jesus.

They talked with Jesus about his "departure." In the Greek text, the word is "exodus." This brings to mind the book of Exodus, and the story of the exodus when Moses led the Israelites led out of Egypt. In a short time, Jesus would lead his own "exodus." It would take place in Jerusalem, a reference to his upcoming suffering and death, resurrection, and ascent into heaven. We do not know exactly what was said in that heavenly conversation. We don't know who did most of the talking. But we do know that the time for Jesus' departure was near. He realized that his remaining time on earth would be difficult. He knew that his final days would be very difficult. Perhaps Moses and Elijah were there to encourage him, to support him and remind of the importance of his mission.

If we can say that Moses and Elijah clearly understood the work that Jesus came to do, we can also say that Peter had almost no understanding. When he saw that Moses and Elijah were about to leave, he made a rather unusual offer: **Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters----one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah**" (33). What was Peter trying to do? What was the purpose of these shelters?

We don't have to feel bad if we admit that we don't know because Luke tells us that even Peter didn't know what he was saying (33). Peter didn't have any long-range plans. He was caught up in the moment. He had seen a glimpse of God's glory. He was in the company of Moses and Elijah. And he didn't want it to end. What Peter failed to understand is that according to God's plan, suffering must come before glory.

What if Jesus had honored Peter's request? What if Jesus had never come down from that mountain? What if Jesus' disciples eventually gave up hope and went back to their homes? What if after some days and months and years Jesus' followers assumed that he was like all the false prophets who had come and gone before? What if Jesus had not completed his mission? If Jesus had listened to Peter, God's glory would mean nothing to us. There would have been no Good Friday. There would have been no Easter Sunday. And there would be no hope, no forgiveness, no salvation for Peter or you or me.

Peter wanted to experience the glory of God on earth, but he was not the only one who was ever guilty of this kind of sin. Sometimes we can forget that this world is not all there is. We don't always remember that we are members of the church militant, not the church triumphant. We look at our problems as obstacles that stand in our way when God may give them to us as opportunities to strengthen our faith. The Bible tells us that **"we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22), but the Lord also assures us that **"our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"** (Romans 8:18).

Thanks be to God that Jesus did not listen to Peter. He came down from the mountain of glory in order to go up to Mount Calvary. He descended the mount of transfiguration to ascend the mount of crucifixion. On that hill God's Son did not look very glorious at all. He was tired. He was bruised. He was beaten. But Jesus went to the cross willingly for us. He set aside his glory for us. And he gave up more than his glory. God's Son forfeited his very life to take away our sins.

Jesus stood on that mountain. Moses and Elijah were on that mountain. Peter, James and John were on that mountain. The presence of God was also there. And as we stand on that mountain, the Father gives us this direction about his Son: listen to his Word.

3. Listen to His Word

The presence of God was visible in the form of a cloud, and this was not the first time. God led the children of Israel in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day (Ex. 13). A cloud rested on Mt. Sinai when God gave the law to Moses (Ex. 19). A cloud signified the presence of God in the tabernacle (Ex. 40).

As they entered the cloud, a voice came from it: **"This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him"** (35). These words may sound familiar. They are similar to the words God the Father spoke at Jesus' baptism. The words spoken by God at Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. The Father's words on the mount of transfiguration signaled the beginning of the end. The Father called Jesus his "Chosen One." In other words, this was not an accident. There can be no doubt. Jesus had been handpicked by God...before Elijah was taken up into heaven... before Moses was found floating in the Nile River...even before Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. God the Father chose to rescue the world from sin through death of his Son before the world began.

Because Jesus lies at the center of our salvation, because Jesus is the only way to heaven, the Father wants us to listen to him. "Listen to my Son," God says. "Give your full attention to everything he says." We do listen to him every time we open up our Bibles. We listen to him every time we hear his Word. And beginning this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we have the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to him as he speaks to us about his Passion. During the season of Lent, we will follow Jesus from the depths of his suffering to the height of his glory, the glory that he revealed for just a moment at his transfiguration.

As we make the transition today from Epiphany to Lent, our thoughts move from Jesus the Savior who reveals himself to us to Jesus the Savior who suffered for us. The emphasis may change, but our focus remains the same. We still fix our eyes on Jesus. He is God's Son. He is our Savior. Behold his glory. Remember his mission. And listen to his Word. Amen.