

Christ the Rock, Farmington NM – 2/14/2021, Transfiguration, the last Sunday before Lent

## WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Text: Mark 9:2-10

One of the interesting things about working with different national churches around the globe is that Sandy and I have seen a wide variety of customs and worship habits. In Ukraine the pastors chant most of the service including the Scripture readings and prayers. The congregations of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church also include by name all their members in the weekly General Prayer. In Korea the service begins by the worshippers standing up, holding hands and singing: “We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.” The worshippers join the pastor in reading out loud the Scripture readings. Members in our Korean church also meet each morning at 6:00 a.m. for a 30-minute devotion on their way to work. One of the Hong Kong congregations takes time in the service to break up into groups of two and pray individually for one another. Another forms a big circle, holding hands to pray the Lord’s Prayer. In Liberia the worshippers get down on their knees and pound the ground to beat the Devil into submission. In Nigeria a worship service can go on for hours. It takes a while for the 10 to 15 times each service that the worshippers dance by the offering plate to put something into it. My personal record there was 4½ hours, and then our driver pulled us out of the service saying we needed to get going. In Liberia and Nigeria the congregations broadcast their services over loudspeakers to the entire village, so you go to church whether you want to or not. In Russia the congregational president opens the service, welcoming the worshippers. In Hong Kong the congregational president conducts the entire service up to the Gospel reading. Our Lutheran Confessions say that variations in worship like these are perfectly okay as long as the Biblical, doctrinal content of the service is correct.

Today we are going to focus our attention on an event which illustrates another big difference among Christian churches. How many of you came dressed up special today – and I don’t mean because it’s Valentine’s Day? How many of you dressed up in your new transfiguration outfit? How many of you even realized that today is Transfiguration Sunday? It would be different if you were living in Eastern Europe. Transfiguration is BIG there. In fact, if you were a devout member of the Orthodox Church, you would have spent last night at the church in an all-night vigil.

I first realized how fascinated the Eastern Church is with the Transfiguration when a pastor from Belarus attended a course at our seminary in Ukraine. Belarus is Europe’s most repressive country. Churches there can post no signs or names or even place a cross outside their buildings, and attendance is limited to a maximum of 19 people. Pastor Nikolai Badrusov was pastor of two such small congregations in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. He came for a sermon-writing class and was assigned Isaiah 53 as a sermon-text. You know, Isaiah 53: *We all like sheep have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was cut off from the land of the living...* and so on. Pastor Badrusov’s sermon on that text went something like this: “Isaiah is talking about Jesus who was transfigured on the mountaintop. The transfiguration is a very important event....” And then he went on to preach about the transfiguration without any reference to Jesus’ suffering and dying for our sins, without any reference at all to the Isaiah text.

Pastor Badrusov was reflecting the emphasis in the theology of the Eastern Church – the Orthodox family of churches. Our western churches usually have Christ's cross as the focal point of our worship. An Eastern church is more likely to have a picture of the Transfiguration or of Jesus' sitting on his throne in the glory of Heaven. Eastern theologians criticize us in the western church, saying that we focus too much on Good Friday, too much on the humiliation, the suffering, the death of Jesus, too much on sin and guilt. They prefer to focus on the glory of Jesus, on the glory we share already now because God dwells in us and is making us more and more godlike, on the glory that awaits us in Heaven.

As in most points of theology, the solution to this seeming conflict rests in balance. Both Christ's humiliation and his exaltation, both his death and resurrection, both his humanity and his divinity need to be held clearly before us.

Before we begin the solemn season of Lent when the humility and humanity of Jesus will be clearly on display, today we will focus on Jesus' glory as we spend some time **WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP**. It's

- I. **An Experience to Bedazzle our Senses and**
- II. **An Event to Transform our Lives.**

The Lord Jesus took three disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain to pray with him. The disciples were tired, however. It had been a hard week. They probably had walked a lot, and there was always the crowd which followed Jesus and wanted to hear him. As Jesus led the three disciples to this place of quiet, they became drowsy and slept. But Jesus awoke them to see the marvelous Transfiguration. Think what they would have missed if they had slept on! Satan still likes that temptation! But think what we miss on occasions when sleep is more persuasive than the call of God's Word. Think what we miss when we are too tired on Sunday to come to church or too tired to listen carefully to the sermon. On occasions like that we do not hear the revelation which God has prepared for us and our needs.

The disciples awoke to see a most bedazzling sight: *There Jesus was transfigured before them. His clothes became radiant, -dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them (2-3).* Jesus was changed; his face shined with the glory of God. His clothes blazed with light – *as bright as a flash of lightning*, Luke says. The disciples saw with their own eyes that Jesus is God. They saw – and have recorded for us to see – the glory which Jesus put aside to become a man, but which he again took up after Easter. They saw what Jesus looks like now in Heaven.

When I taught in Nigeria five years ago, we had no electricity, except for three hours of generator power each evening. Once the generator was turned off, I sat in the dark with only a small battery-powered reading light. I found out that wasn't such a good idea. Since it was the only light around, the gnats came through the holes in the screens and swarmed around me. I usually gave up after 10 or 15 minutes and just went to bed. But it gave me a good sermon illustration. Jesus is the one and only light of the world, a bright and glorious light shining in the midst of mankind's darkness. God wants all people to come swarming to Jesus and to his salvation.

Imagine yourself standing in contrast to that glorified Jesus. On Judgment Day each of us will stand before that perfect, glorious Judge. We stand black with sins by contrast to him. The Bible

itself describes how it looks: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags* (Is. 64:6). All our righteousnesses – the things we’ve done which we consider good, our prize works – even these are filthy rags in comparison to God’s perfection. That’s why Peter, James and John were terrified on the Mount of Transfiguration. They realized that they were completely unworthy to stand before the Lord of Glory. So are we! That’s why what happened next is so important.

As the disciples watch, *there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus* (4). Moses and Elijah, who also shined in a spectacular way, were two of the greatest Old Testament believers. Moses had been the leader through whom God gave the entire Old Testament law, and yet even as God was giving the law, Moses saw the people rebel against God and set up the golden calf. Moses himself had been a murderer. Elijah preached years later to a Jewish nation which had rejected God. Only 7,000 still worshipped the true God. It’s significant, therefore, what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus talked about. Luke tells us: *They spoke about his death which would come at Jerusalem*. The conversation switched to another mountain which Jesus would climb later. Instead of glory and praise, that mount would bring humiliation and death to Jesus. Moses and Elijah talked about Golgotha and the rescue to be won there. For Moses and Elijah were Christians also; their spiritual hopes rested on the Messiah too. Before the fact they trusted in God’s promise to send the Savior who would be sacrificed for the world’s sins.

The most startling thing was yet to come: *A cloud appeared and overshadowed them* (7). Such a cloud showed that God the Father was present. In Moses’ day God had led his people through the wilderness by a bright cloud which went before them. And a bright cloud covered Mt. Sinai as Moses received God’s law there. In Elijah’s day clouds forming in the west were God’s answer to Elijah’s prayer that God end the land’s three years without rain. The bright cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration already by itself, told the disciples that God was there. Then the disciples heard a voice call out. It was the voice of God the Father. *This is my Son, whom I love*, it says. God’s Son, the second member of the Trinity, was standing there in the person of Jesus. And God the Father has a command for us regarding his Son, *Listen to him!*

What a bedazzling sight the disciples here witnessed. Do you want to hear something even more mindboggling? Listen again to today’s second reading: *We all... are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory* (2 Cor 3:18). *We...are being transformed*, Paul writes. He uses the same Greek word as our Gospel does when it says that *Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop*. Think of it, we are going to shine with glory like Moses and Elijah did; we are going to shine with glory like Jesus does. God has a change of clothes ready for us. It is the change of clothes which comes when we are dressed in Jesus. *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ* (Gal3:27), the Bible says. The glory of that new clothing will be fully seen following the Day of Judgment, when we share in Jesus’ glory in Heaven. *We will all be changed –in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality* (1 Cor 15:51-53). What encouragement we receive when we think of what God has in store for us!

Today we have spent some time **WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP**. It was **An Experience to Bedazzle our Senses**. It’s **An Event to Transform our Lives**.

Imagine the emotional roller-coaster the disciples were riding. Immediately before our text, Mark tells us that Peter had made his amazing confession: *You, Jesus, are the Messiah*. It was a spiritual high-point, but immediately their emotions and hopes were dashed as Jesus tells them that he would soon be killed. Jesus lifts their spirits by assuring them *on the third day I will rise again*. Then he dashes their enthusiasm by telling them they must take up their cross and be ready for persecution and even martyrdom. Their spirits soar on the mountaintop as they witness the transfiguration, but then they are left totally baffled as *Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead*. Mark tells us that, confused and puzzled, they discussed what *rising from the dead* meant. Did you catch that? They're not excited about the amazing wonders they'd just seen. They're troubled about Jesus' words about his dying and rising.

Each of us knows something about the spiritual roller-coaster. We also ride it, don't we? We're excited, joyful one day; discouraged, questioning the next. We recognize how blessed we are that God has called us to faith and dressed us in Christ's righteousness – all because of his grace. Then we are plunged into doubt by some tragedy or disappointment. We walk out of church resolved to glorify God in all we do -- and then find that sin creeps back into our thoughts and words often before we get home from the service. Instead of meditating on the amazing love and grace of God, our thoughts quickly return to the television set, the Internet, the unfinished work-projects, and the dirty clothes waiting to be washed.

In his second letter Peter says that we are better off than he or the other disciples were. *We were eyewitnesses of his majesty*, Peter writes, but we were confused and baffled. You, Peter says to us, have better equipment for leveling out the roller-coaster. *You have the prophetic message as something completely reliable... a light shining in a dark place....*[You have the Scriptures written by] *men who spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit* (2 Peter 1:16-21). The verb Peter uses is one that is used with sailing ships. The word means to be blown along by the wind. Just as the wind fills the ship's sails and moves the ship forward, so the Holy Spirit filled the Bible's writers and carried them along as they wrote.

Paul tells us: *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God* (2 Tim 3:16). Inspiration is like a person playing a flute or clarinet. The sound comes from the instrument, but the sound comes only because the musician is blowing into the instrument. What sound is made depends entirely on the musician and on how he blows and how he plays the instrument. The flute or clarinet will sound entirely different when I blow into it than when it is played by someone who knows how. In the same way the Bible writers were instruments of the Holy Spirit. The human writers put their words on paper – using their own vocabularies, recording their own research-- but they wrote only what the Holy Spirit moved them to write.

As a result of inspiration, the Bible is a DIVINE book of fact. It is God's book. He stands behind every word, in fact every letter in it. Therefore we can be certain that the Bible is truth. Nothing manmade will ever be totally free from human error. That is why God did not allow humans who can make mistakes to write the Bible. He took over and carried along the writers, so that every word is perfect.

One of the sad and unpleasant parts of my job of teaching future pastors was telling students about what is going on in today's religious world. Most of the students in Eastern Europe, China, Korea, and Africa have been isolated from the Christianity in Western Europe and the United States. They still have a childlike faith like that which Jesus holds up as the ideal for us all. In general terms, I had to tell them that uncertainty and doubt have crept into much of the Christian Church, that there are many who question the truthfulness of what the Bible says. But then I quickly assured them that in their fellowship with the WELS and ELS they have found a place where God's Word is still God's Word. The Holy Spirit has convinced us that God exists and has revealed himself to us in the Bible.

The disciples had an interesting reaction to all these events on the Transfiguration Mount. Peter suggested that they build three shelters – and just stay there. But this suggestion was foolish. On earth we Christians cannot isolate ourselves. For that matter, if Jesus had agreed to stay up there, then he won't have climbed Golgotha a few weeks later, and his rescue mission to earth would have ended in failure.

Like Peter, James, and John, in our worship service today we have spent some time WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP, but we cannot stay here on the mountain. We must come down from the mountain and go back to our homes and our responsibilities in the world. There's work for us to do there. We Christians cannot and should not try to isolate ourselves from this world's problems and needs. Our mission in life is to share the message that help and blessings come through faith in the Savior Jesus Christ. Through the witness of our lives, through our prayers, through our support of our congregation, through our invitations to friends, neighbors, relatives inviting them to "Come and See," God continues to build his Church. Only he knows what he is going to do through us! We can be sure, however, that he has a plan and use for each of us.

Today we have spent some time **WITH JESUS ON THE MOUNTAINTOP**. It was **An Experience to Bedazzle our Senses**. It is **An Event to Transform our Lives**. Now we must leave the mountain. We leave with the assurance that God goes with us. *The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.* This benediction is not a prayer. It is one final repetition of God's promise to each of us. As we return to our homes and jobs in the world, God accompanies us and will remain with us until the day we meet him in the sky and behold him in his full glory, until the day when Jesus returns to complete our transfiguration so we also shine *as bright as a flash of lightning*.

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How good, Lord, to be here!  
Yet we may not remain;  
But since you bid us leave the mount,  
Come with us to the plain.