

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
St. Matthew 17:1-9: "The LORD Make His Face Shine upon You."
January 23/24, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Almighty and everlasting God, whose blessed Son revealed Himself to His chosen Apostles when He was transfigured on the holy mount, and amidst the excellent glory spoke with Moses and Elijah of His departure which He should accomplish at Jerusalem: Grant to us Your servants, that, beholding the brightness of His countenance, we may be strengthened to bear the cross, and be changed into His likeness from glory to glory; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, p. 137)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

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." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who has not turned away from us but looks upon us with love, dear fellow redeemed:

When you think of Jesus, how do you picture Him? Does He have light or dark hair, blue or brown eyes, beard or no beard? How tall do you imagine Him to be? Of all the people you know, who would you say looks most like the picture in your mind? Maybe your picture is similar to the depiction of Jesus on our altar painting, or maybe it is quite a bit different.

However you picture Him, I'm guessing none of you think of Him the way He is described today. None of you think of Him in His transfigured state. You think of Him like He was most of the time on earth, looking just like the people around Him. But that was in His state of humiliation. Now He is exalted at the right hand of the Father, dwelling in "unapproachable light" (1Ti. 6:16). Now His face shines like the sun all the time, and the saints in heaven look upon Him in all His radiant glory.

But that is not how we see Him. We can't see Him at all; His glory is hidden from us. He hides His glory for our own good. When Moses talked with the LORD on Mount Sinai, Moses asked to see the LORD's glory. The LORD said He would make His goodness pass before Moses, but that Moses could not see His face, since *"man shall not see me and live"* (Exo. 33:20).

This illustrates for us how far sinful man is from the holy God. Moses was one of the greatest prophets that God sent. He used to meet the LORD on the mountain, and the LORD would speak with him *"as a man speaks to his friend"* (Exo. 33:11). When Moses came back down the mountain from the presence of the LORD, his face shone brightly (Exo. 34:29-35). His skin had absorbed the light from God, and it was now radiating out from him. But even though he was this close to God, God did not permit him to look upon His full glory. If Moses had done that, he would have died.

Moses was still a sinner just as we are, and sinners cannot look at God in all His holiness. Think how hard it is to look toward the sun, and how much damage it does if we look too long. The almighty God who made the sun shines brighter. The LORD is holy and full of light. By nature, we are unholy and full of darkness. Even after we are converted, there is still sin in us. We do not totally leave behind the works of darkness.

Take the eye. Our eyes look upon much that is beautiful and good. This time of year, we see a blanket of snow covering all things and frost coating the trees. Our eyes allow us to see the people we love and do the work God has set out for us to do. But we do not always use our eyes for good. We judge people and treat them with contempt because we don't like how they look. We roll our eyes at our parents or other authorities. We look at things we should not look at, and we watch things we should not watch.

Our eyes are something like our mouths in this respect. When we eat and drink healthy things, our body stays in good shape. But if all we consume is junk food, our health suffers. So if we are careful to watch and read and look at only what is beneficial to us, we are much healthier. We don't want our eyes to adjust to the darkness; we want them to adjust to the light. When our eyes adjust to the light of God's holy Word, we have little desire to peer into the darkness.

But we have not always filled our eyes with good things. We all have things we wish we could unsee. For many of us, it might be things we have watched on TV or online. We told ourselves that we could handle the violence or the explicit content. But now we can't forget it. Those images are stuck in our mind. We thought it wouldn't be a big deal, but it is. We allowed it to enter our eyes and sink into our brain, and now it's stuck. We want to get rid of it, but we can't. We can't take back what we have seen any more than we can take back what we have said or change the things we have done.

This is why we cannot stand in God's unveiled presence as we are. We cannot face His perfect glory. We are sinners, and each of us has a long trail of sins stretching out behind us. Many believe they can overcome their sin on their own. They think they can come into God's presence by their own efforts. They think they can lift themselves out of their unholiness and become holy. But that is not in our power. With Paul, each of us must confess that *"nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing"* (Rom. 7:18-19).

The three disciples realized this about themselves. They were given a glimpse of Jesus' glory as He talked with Moses and Elijah. But as soon as God the Father's voice boomed out of the cloud, *"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him"* – *"they fell on their faces and were terrified."* The glory was too much. This reminds us of when Jesus filled the fishermen's nets with fish after they had not been able to catch anything. When Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees and said, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"* (Luk. 5:8).

This is how we feel when our sins are exposed by God's holy Law. We may look like we have it pretty well together. But inside we are filled with sinful passions, anger, doubts, and struggles. *"Why should the LORD look kindly upon me?"* we think. *"He sees what I am. He knows my sin."* And so we hide our faces. We can't bear to look toward the holy God when we are so full of sin.

This is what a child does when he has done something wrong. Maybe he broke something or took what he wasn't supposed to. So he goes and hides – under the bed or in the closet. Then he hears his name being called and the footsteps coming. They stop right where he is. He expects wrath. He expects to see a face twisted in anger. He tries to crawl deeper into the shadows. But the face he finally sees through tears is not the face he anticipated. He sees a face of compassion and an open hand reaching for his. *"Don't be afraid. Come here. I'm not angry with you. I forgive you."*

God's face of compassion and His hand reaching out to us is Jesus. Out of love for all sinners, God sent His only-begotten Son. We could not ascend into God's holy presence, but He could lower Himself to us. He *"made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"* (Phi. 2:7). He covered up His glory, so that sinners could see Him, walk with Him, touch Him, look at His smiling face.

He came to give Himself up for our wrongs, to suffer and die in our place. He went to the cross for all those things we wish we could unsee and unsay and unthink. He paid for all our sins by shedding His holy, precious blood. By His sacrifice, God's wrath toward our sin was turned away. We do not have to try to cover our sins or hide in the shadows anymore. The Lord is not angry with us; He forgives us. He looks upon us with grace and favor.

His shining face is turned toward us whenever we gather together around the means of grace. Jesus has left us clear signs and powerful proofs of His forgiveness. He instituted Holy Baptism as the way to bring you into His holy Church, to cleanse you of your sins and cover you in His holiness. He gave us a Holy Meal in which He invites you to eat His own flesh and drink His own blood, so that His glorious light shines inside you. And He installs preachers to declare to you the good news of salvation and His love for you which does not change.

It is hard to recognize His brightness and glory in these humble-looking means. But by faith you perceive it. You see your glorious Savior in His Word and Sacraments. You see Him reaching out to touch you in your sin and fear, just as He reached out and touched His cowering disciples. You hear Him say to your trembling soul, *"Rise, and have no fear."*

His words are the encouragement you need to turn to Him and stop hiding. You lift your eyes to Him and see His face of love and compassion. The LORD told Moses' brother Aaron to comfort His people with this picture and to speak this benediction upon them: *"The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace"* (Num. 6:24-26, NKJV). The LORD's face does shine upon you because He has redeemed you through His death and resurrection, and He has made you His own through Holy Baptism.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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