

“God’s Glory... in Christ... *forever!*”

Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

March 3, 2019

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

Our text, “As he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On the one hand, perhaps it’s comforting that the disciples struggle with faith the same way we do; on the other hand, it’s to our shame that we struggle with faith the same way the disciples do.

The transfiguration of Christ is – in a sense – a microcosm and a window into how fallen man always struggles with the truth that the God of glory seeks to deal with us by His grace.

Luke’s gospel is the only of the three Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) to mention that the disciples were heavy with sleep. As I’ve said before, the Holy Spirit doesn’t waste words in the Scripture, so there must be a reason to mention it when Matthew and Mark don’t. And, what other reason would there be than to show that the three disciples are not that impressed with Jesus praying on the mountain top. Recall, two weeks ago, we said that mountaintops were important places in the Scriptures – places where God’s holiness interacted with humanity (whether at Sinai, or Horeb, or –

as depicted of our new covenant joy – at Mt Zion). And there, two weeks ago, we heard that Jesus on the mountain was dialoguing in prayer within the mystery of the Holy Trinity and then came down the mountain (with his disciples with him) as the Holy One of God to proclaim blessings and woes. Remember that?

Well, now the same Holy One of God is on a mountain top again, and he has brought three disciples with him. But they have apparently forgotten (and here's where they are so much like us, and we like them)... they have apparently forgotten that Jesus' prayer (even before the transfiguration) is heavenly dialogue within the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Perhaps they weren't typically within 'earshot', and perhaps it *doesn't* apply to use that common line, "Oh, what I would give to be a fly on the wall;" and yet, one would expect that even to watch the Holy One of God pray would be reason to contemplate the majesty and mystery of what's going on *before and without the visual aid*. Of Jesus' discussion with Moses and Elijah, the hymn says that Jesus "holds converse (conversation) high," but why not say the same of the prayer Jesus prayed on this mountaintop, at first, not as visually stunning as once he's transfigured and can be seen talking with Moses and Elijah, but certainly even a 'cut above' simply by the fact that it was with the Father and the Holy Spirit!

But, of course, such veiled glory is not exciting to the disciples and us. We're not wrong to love to meditate on the glorious revelation on the mount. After all, doesn't this episode tie us back to

Jesus' baptism, when very similar words of the Father proclaimed His glory had been manifested in flesh and blood, "You are my Son!" How glorious is the meditation on the incarnate God! But that's just as glorious in the *quiet* moment of his prayer. Yet, such *non*-display of glory is not what tickles our fancy. In fact, this isn't the only time the disciples slumber while Jesus prays. It won't be long and they'll be slumbering again – heavy with sleep – while the Lord prays in anguish, prays to the same Father, in dialogue with the same Spirit – praying in the hours before the cross, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Likewise, we find ourselves slumbering at the news of veiled glory, not just on this Transfiguration Sunday, but *so commonly* throughout our lives... when it is the greatest challenge in the world to get ourselves to appreciate what is actually happening in each Divine Service, or to get ourselves to define daily life based on the foundation of the veiled glory Christ our high priest promises to share with us each Sunday.

The problem isn't that we should never love or think about or talk about God's glory; after all, we sing "Glory be to God on high" and again, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit", and again, we are taught to pray the doxological conclusion, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the *glory*"- that we would speak of a glorious God... that's not really the issue, is it?

Rather, the issue with us sinners is that we forget that God *always* is glorious, so that (we tell ourselves) the momentary

unveiled display of glory is the one chance we have to relish in God's glory. But, notice what we've immediately done... we've reinterpreted God's glory to be an occasional sight of brilliance to wow and entertain us – *moments* of miracles, *moments* of display, *moments* of holiness, rather than the natural character and trait of God before which we ought be terrified and humbled, if not for the safety that is ours in Christ. When we are taught to give praise to God with doxological words, we are taught not to end with "Thine is the kingdom and power and glory" but to *end* with "forever and ever." And, if it is *always* God's, then why do we covet so feverishly that momentary display of glory, when we know our God will have it tomorrow as he had it yesterday... will have it even on the cross as on the mountain top? Ought we not rather be paralyzed – as were the three disciples when they actually beheld the glorious scene – ought we not be paralyzed in holy fear by the reality that our God is glorious; we are not! Our God is glorious, and even a glimpse of his glory – as the fear of the disciples reminds us – is enough to condemn us. Remember, when Peter beheld Jesus' miracle with the catch of fish, he did not respond as an entertained child, clapping his hands and saying, "Do it again! Do it again!" But he trembled and fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me; I am unclean."

And now, here at the holy mountain, at the sight of Moses and Elijah, Peter is again dumbfounded, so that he knows not what to say, and starts rambling about building three tents. But, even this

supposed show of honor misses the point, doesn't it? Recall, just moments earlier, Christ had been in divine conversation with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and there was nothing that Peter wanted to do to capture that, but sleep. So also for us sinners, who are swept up more with momentary displays than with meditation upon the actual nature and substance of our glorious God and the Holy One of God.

The world would love to see momentary displays of glory. How many church bodies and mega-church communities build their hope and foundation on such things: as long as people can walk in and say, "This looks and sounds glorious," that's their recipe for success, isn't it? And yet, the Lord says, "No, look up and you will see Jesus found alone. Here is my glory, Christ at work on the cross, as he himself says, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son that Your Son may glorify you"... And now, Christ carries that glorious grace into the Divine Service: *Here* (Christ says) is my glory I share with you – this is my Word, these are my Sacraments, this is my body and blood, this is my forgiveness of your sins, this is the gate of heaven and eternal life", and the world yawns and sleeps... and, if we're not careful, we easily fall into the same slumber. The writer to the Hebrews warns us from 'drifting away,' and exhorts us, "Let us not forsake gathering together (around God's glorious altar of divine service) *as some are prone to do.*"

And, why not?, because here we actually have what Peter wanted to capture on the mountain. Here we have the Law and Prophets pointing us to Christ. Here we have the fulfilled Word of what *there* Moses and Elijah looked forward to – Jesus’ glorious “exodus” through the cross, grave and ascension – His deliverance of His people, and the never-ending benefits of that deliverance being administered by that same Christ, now as our High Priest. Here we have the declaration of God Most High in holy words, saying “this is my Son, my Chosen One (or, synonymously, “My Christ”), listen to Him.” And here we have the Son shielding us with his glory and yet sharing with us his glory, “This is My body, this is my blood, for you.”

And, if ours is not a momentary glimpse to be captured, but a faithful fount of God’s grace in Christ flowing to us in veiled form, then we have every reason to appreciate not mere flashes of glory, but the very glorious nature and plans of our God; and we have every reason to meditate upon and cherish how those plans of God have played out in history as the testament of his glory and promise to His people and to the honor of his Holy Name.

Doesn’t the full picture of God’s glory in Christ include not just the mountaintop glimpse, but the proclamation of that same Christ going to the cross for us and our transgressions. Peter wanted to capture the momentary glimpse, and the Father called from heaven to put an end to that and to say, “My glory is revealed in this Jesus, and his purpose includes not a mountaintop of holy isolation,

but a sacrifice of atoning justification. Listen to Him! Watch Him! Follow him down the mountain, into the plain, and unto Jerusalem, and there you will behold the glory of God pouring forth in the one who lays down his life for the sins of the whole world.”

Think about how St. John meditates upon this when he says at the beginning of his gospel, “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son of God, full of *grace* and truth.” The glimpses of God’s glory (if we were to try and capture them) are incomplete and even misleading if they are not seen in the lens of His grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ.

The same apostle John says at the end of his gospel, “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, (synonymous with “Chosen One”), and that you may have life in his name.” In other words, “that you might listen to Him, for he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and He alone Has the words of eternal life.” That’s glorious – to be the only One who has the keys to the kingdom of heaven – and yet, how gracious, that He freely bestows His gifts of the cross to us and unlocks the gate of heaven.

The apostle Peter says similarly when speaking of the salvation that is ours in Christ, “We did not follow cunningly devised fables... we were eyewitnesses of his majesty when we were with him on the holy mountain.” But then he goes on, “You have something more sure, the prophetic Word” – yes, that thing so commonly held and seen and heard that our eyelids become heavy

and we labor to stay awake, and we slumber though our ears have the great privilege of benefiting from being more than “a fly on the wall” but the intended recipient of God’s glorious and holy Word.

Here, that holy Word of truth fixes our eyes and hearts on Christ crucified. It proclaims His suffering and death. It leads us down the mountain, if you will, into the declaration of His focused march to the cross. It promises us and – by divine authority – it effects for us here and now the gifts and benefits of that all-sufficient sacrifice. What a glorious Word, bestowing upon us the grace of God, and making us fellow heirs and partakers of the glory of Christ.

Thus, let us not so easily succumb to the temptations to slumber before that which we have known so well. If the disciples were often his invited guests in times of his prayer, how much more often have we been invited guests at his holy altar? If the disciples beheld his glory for a moment, how much more often do our eyes see and our tongues taste and our lips confess that we have seen his salvation that he has prepared before the face of all people? If the disciples saw God’s glory manifest in the incarnate Christ *before* his death and resurrection, how much more do we have the certainty of God’s glory manifest in the incarnate Christ now crucified and risen, in whom the *glory* of God and *grace* of God have been eternally married?

To be sure, in this world, the glory of God in the sacrifice of Jesus is foreign to all – a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness

to the Gentiles. Your friends won't get it; your neighbors won't understand... unless we confess it to and teach them!

But, to live in this world with hope in such cruciform glory and such veiled weekly treasures of glory is not at all appetizing or pleasing to the world. So true is this, that the last petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from evil," Luther meditates upon as a rescue not just from sin, but from this entire fallen world, so blind to the gracious work of the glorious God. And Luther thus teaches us that "we pray in this petition that... finally, when our last hour comes, our Lord would give us a blessed end, and **graciously** take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven." And how can we be certain in this prayer and hope? Because, "For thine is the kingdom and the power *and the glory* forever and ever."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
March 3, 2019