

Matthew 17.1-9
Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord
10 February 2019
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It had all started just six days earlier. This business that we just heard of on the mount of transfiguration.

St. Matthew tells us that “from that time on Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (Matt. 16.21).

Peter had seen so much good news! Wherever Jesus went, the blind were given sight, the lepers cleansed, paralytics given muscle tone and strength, the dead raised.

But this news that Jesus had just given, just six days earlier, it was too much for Peter. For this news was not the road to glory. It was the road to suffering. The suffering of the Son of God.

And for Peter that just didn't compute. It didn't compute that the One with power to change water into wine, to calm the winds, to heal the sick, to raise the dead should—all that stuff we've heard this Epiphany that the Lord Jesus did—that the One with that kind of power should...die. Be killed. He had come to end suffering. Not succumb to it. He'd come to bring an end to sinful violence. Not become its Victim.

And so Peter, impetuous Peter, when he heard that news—the news that Jesus must suffer many things and be killed—well, he couldn't just let it stand. In fact Peter, impetuous Peter, who always knew better than everyone else, he plucked up his courage. Took Jesus aside. And rebuked Him. That's what Matthew says. No asking questions. No seeking a clarification. Instead, he looked right into his own crystal ball—he had it all figured out. He adopted the voice of a prophet. And he told Jesus, “This shall *never* happen to you!” Because Peter knew better.

And you know how the rest of it goes. Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You're a hindrance to Me. For your mind isn't set on things of God, but on the things of man.”

How those words must have rung in Peter's ears. And stung. Not so much being called Satan. But how Peter in his zeal wasn't helping, but in the way.

And how those words must have dashed his hopes. Because Peter had it all figured out: the way of God was from glory to greater glory. If this was just the beginning of the reign of the Messiah. And if the Messiah's glory was already evident in the healings and miracles and resurrections—why, surely, something far better was just around the corner. The glorious Jesus would glorify His followers. No crosses to bear. No suffering to be had.

That's just like you, isn't it? Cross and suffering the furthest thing from your mind. Because you're a follower of Jesus, after all! And you've got it all figured out: the Christian life is supposed to be easy. An opinion sadly stoked and fed by the prosperity teachers of our land.

But Jesus wouldn't let Peter off the hook that easy; nor will He let you. Just as the Lord Jesus came to suffer and die and through His suffering and death to save Peter, so has He done the same for you.

And just as He had to prepare Peter for the way of the cross, so must He prepare you, too. In this life you will have tribulation. That's Christ's promise. And the road to glory is the road through suffering. It's a road through sadness, timidity, fear, poverty, contempt, illness, weakness. That fellow-redeemed, is the road of suffering. But make no mistake about it, the road of suffering is also the road of the *Gospel*. The road of salvation. If you have been redeemed by Christ the crucified, you will suffer. But that suffering is a sign and mark of your redemption.

That's exactly what Peter needed to hear. That's exactly what Peter needed to know.

That was six days ago.

But now, as if to confirm that Peter was right and Jesus was wrong, up there on the unnamed mountain, right in front of Peter and the two other glory-grubbing disciples, the brothers John and James, Jesus was transfigured.

Now, fellow-redeemed: what Peter and James and John saw that day was nothing like you've ever seen. And like nothing you'll ever see on this earth. The divinity of Jesus practically burst through His human nature. And all Matthew can do when he tells us about what happened is talk in approximations. He can't say what it actually was. All he can do is say what it was *like*. Jesus' face shone *like the sun*. And His clothes became white *like light*.

But one thing's for certain: it was all glorious. Just what Peter had been waiting for. And James and John. And there it was. Their eyes weren't lying. Nothing but glory. A glory so great it can't be accurately described.

And so Peter seized his opportunity. He came in the middle of the 3 talking there on the mountain—Jesus along with Moses and Elijah—interrupted them in the middle of the conversation. And plop! laid the solution on them: "Lord, it is good for us to be here! And just to make sure it stays just like this, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'll build you—each of you—a little tabernacle." It was an ingenious move. A tabernacle's where the glory of God dwells, after all. And long as Peter could contain it in a tent, he could have it. Nothing but sheer Messianic glory. That was something Peter could get behind. That was something he could believe in. That was something Peter could remain faithful to. God as Peter thought God should be.

But certainly not God as He actually is.

Because God as He actually is doesn't conform to any pre-conceived notions you and I might have. Or even Peter.

"God loves the righteous," we say rightly. And so we think God seeks out the righteous and then loves them. But nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, God finds what He loves, and makes what He loves righteous.

"God is all-glorious," we say rightly. And so we think God seeks out and surrounds Himself with the glorious. But nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, He finds what is insignificant in this world, the low and the despised, and makes them glorious through His own suffering on the Holy Cross.

“God wishes to give me a blessed life,” we say rightly. And so we shoehorn whatever we think is happy and blessed into that thought. But nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the blessed life the Lord gives you is the comfort of His Word and Sacrament even in the face of the most daunting suffering, and even death itself.

And that’s precisely the God who offered and gave Himself to Peter on the mount of transfiguration. Yes. He was all-glorious. Yes. He wanted to give Peter—and James and John, even you—the blessed life. Yes. He loves the righteous.

But the road to the glory we glimpse in the Transfiguration isn’t by way of glory. It’s by way of suffering. And death. The suffering of the Son of God for the sins of the world. The death of the Son of God, the only Righteous, for the many unrighteous. For you. The hideous curse of the accursed tree that the accursed might be blessed in the forgiveness of their sins.

That’s what the Father meant when He spoke from the cloud: “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to Him.”

Yes, Peter. Listen to Him. Listen to Him and learn that if there is to be blessing for you and righteousness and glory—listen to Him and learn that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, and be killed. For you. Listen to Him and learn that before resurrection, there must be death—the death of the very Son of God for the sins of the world. Listen to Him and learn that road to eternal life leads through *death*—your own death in your Baptism. Your burial together with Christ into death. Just like what’s happening to little Ember this morning. Listen to Him and learn that your life is in the blood He shed for you and in the body that was nailed to the Holy Cross. Just what the Lord Jesus wants to give you this morning at His holy altar.

And to confirm that very point, as they left the mountain Jesus told the 3: “Tell no one until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” First suffering. Then glory.

Fellow-redeemed: that’s the One who was transfigured on the mountain. It was God’s own Son in the flesh. The flesh of sinners to suffer as the Sinner. The flesh of the unrighteous to make them righteous. The flesh of the accursed to grant them every blessing. The shame of the cross that sinners might have the glory of the resurrection. The Divine Creditor who paid the debt of His debtors. In full.

But now the Divine Creditor has been raised from the dead. The gag order’s been lifted. Jesus, God’s own Son, has paid the debt of sinners. In full. A message that rings throughout the world. Even here at St. John’s. Let’s bear that in mind today as we celebrate another blessing of the Lord—the burning of our mortgage. It’s wonderful to be free of that financial debt.

Even more glorious is the fact that the Lord has built Himself a tabernacle here. Where the transfigured Christ is present whenever His Word is taught; wherever He joins His Word with water, bread, and wine. Just as He promised.

Only listen to Him.

Amen.

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