

Rev. David R. Solum
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
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Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City
Matthew 17:1-9

As we reach the close of this Epiphany season, a church season all about Jesus revealing Himself to be our Savior, the Christ and Son of God, we end with two mountaintop epiphanies: Moses on Sinai and the disciples on the mount of transfiguration. Take a look at how the two events compare. Before they approached the mountain, Moses threw the blood of the covenant on the people. Before the disciples went up the mountain, Jesus spoke of shedding His blood. Both Moses and the disciples saw the Lord “six days later” or on the holy seventh day. Both were enveloped by a cloud and saw the shining, fiery glow of God’s glory. Moses Himself was present for both of them. The manifestations of God’s glory brought fear and trembling to the people. Moses, in Exodus, was given the commandments written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. In the Gospel, God simply told the disciples to listen to Jesus. He is the new lawgiver. And if you continued reading, in both instances, Moses and Jesus with the disciples descend from the mountain into a chaotic scene.

In the Transfiguration we learn that Jesus is not just a new Moses or lawgiver; He is not just a new prophet like Elijah; He is *the Lawgiver, the Word of God, the God of Sinai*, God made man. This revelation would give the Apostles confidence and bravery in their preaching and teaching (as we read in 2 Peter chapter 1), for they’d have to face off against Jewish leaders, false teachers, cities with deep seated pagan identities, kings and emperors, and so on. Christ wanted these three to not only be witness of His ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, but also to

be witnesses of His glory with God the Father, just as Moses witnessed God's glory, which confirmed his ministry and preaching.

Before the Transfiguration, Jesus had begun speaking about his death, that He must be killed and on the third day rise again. Not only so, but they too would have to take up their crosses and follow Him. Today, I think perhaps the phrase "take up your cross" is so beyond our imagination that we don't fully comprehend it. We will say, "We all have our cross to bear," for pretty insignificant things. I heard one pastor say it about his organist! But bearing your cross is more than just being willing to suffer a little discomfort in life from time to time. We picture the nice wooden crosses we have in our churches or the golden ones around our necks. A first century Jew would have no problem understanding what the cross entailed. There were crosses outside of every city. And they didn't just visualize two boards put together. They saw crosses being dragged by bruised and beaten men through the streets out of the city. They saw crosses standing with bodies on them, dripping with blood, gasping for breath. They saw the drunken soldiers jeering them, breaking their legs with hammers. Jesus' words were a horrifying thought.

In our culture of individualism today, one of the main tenants of this faith is that you must remain happy and comfortable. Follow your dreams, be yourself, love yourself, and do whatever you want as long as you do not inhibit the happiness of others. Especially, you must avoid suffering. We're pretty good at it, mainly because we live in such a prosperous nation. We have the time and money to spend a lot of it on ourselves. But Jesus says things like, "Deny yourself, hate your life, love your neighbor, and take up your cross." If there is something missing in our culture that we need to be sure to instill in our children, it is that there are things worth suffering

and dying for. Most importantly, we all should be willing to be crucified for the Gospel. We should follow Christ at all costs.

But we are too afraid. We're afraid of giving too much money away because we don't want to cramp our lifestyle. We're afraid of sacrificing sports activities for church because we just want our kids to be happy and like us. We're afraid to ask for Sunday mornings off because we don't want to lose our jobs. We're afraid to talk to our unchurched family members about the faith because we don't want that uncomfortable conversation. We're afraid to address drug and alcohol addictions because of the stigma attached to it and the possibility of suffering and failure. We're afraid to confess our sins because we don't want to be judged. We're afraid that if people know our faith, they will ridicule us for being bigoted or unloving. We're afraid to claim that we have the pure doctrine of the Gospel because of what other Christians will think. We are afraid of the cross.

The disciples were too. Peter even rebuked Jesus for even indicating that He might die in such a way. So, Jesus gave them something to really be afraid of. He brought them into the presence of the terrifying glory of God. This is the God who thundered from Sinai and said that if anyone so much as touched the mountain, they would be put to death. And the people begged Moses not to ever hear the voice again. This is the God who said to Moses, "You cannot see My face and live." But even the glimpse of God's glory made Moses' face shine so that the Israelites were afraid of him, causing Moses to veil his face whenever he came down the mountain. All sin must be burned up and destroyed before our holy, almighty God. So, when the cloud enveloped

the disciples and they heard the voice of God, they were afraid and fell down to the ground.

There is nothing more terrifying than damnation. And that is what we all deserve.

Matthew's Gospel is the only one to record what happened next. Jesus reached down and touched them saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And as soon as He said this, they saw only Jesus. Later, after Jesus had been crucified and risen and they were able to connect all the dots and realize what Jesus did for them, these three would remember this powerful experience and be emboldened to take up their cross. They were in the presence of God Almighty and were not destroyed because God Almighty is also their Savior Jesus Christ, who became true man, took up His cross, and poured out His holy blood as a sacrifice for their sins. What then are imprisonments, beatings, and rejection to them? What are Satan and demons? What is death? They're all weak, conquered things that will only bring them nearer to Christ and His glorious victory.

And so, the three of them went on after they were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost to conquer many hearts by the Gospel and give their lives for it. James spread the faith as far as Spain, but returned to Jerusalem and was beheaded by King Herod Agrippa. His accuser who brought him to judgment, so moved by James' testimony, chose to be beheaded with him. James was the first Apostle to be martyred. Peter was imprisoned several times, beaten, and finally after a good, fruitful ministry from Jerusalem to Rome, was sentenced to crucifixion. He chose to do it upside down, since he considered himself unworthy to die like his Lord. John, the only Apostle to not suffer martyrdom, was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, survived miraculously unscathed, and was banished to the island of Patmos.

I'm recounting these things for you to give you examples to imitate – not that you would suffer those same things, but that you would gladly forsake the comforts of this life in order to follow Christ's commands, loving your neighbor and giving testimony to the life-changing, life-giving Gospel. For you also have been led into the presence of our God and lived by the grace of Jesus Christ. You were brought to the Father in baptism and your former life was killed. You have been reborn and raised with Christ and God the Holy Spirit made His dwelling in you. There for you have been declared by God holy and right with Him who holds the universe in His hands, judges every impure thing with eternal fire, and who has conquered every evil power and rules over them. You have met God and lived, and His Spirit lives in you. What then can man do to you? Or the earth? Or Satan and his legions? Or death? Nothing can separate you from your God.

Take up your cross and follow Jesus, the Son of God, who suffered all these things and triumphed over them in His resurrection and who is now ascended to the throne of God. He goes with you and fights for you. By His Absolution Christ destroys the power of sin; by the preaching of the Gospel, Christ empowers you to be an instrument of His glory; by giving the new testament of His holy body and blood to you, Christ cleanses you and makes you holy to enter into the presence of God in heaven. And you are invited to call upon Him in every need with the confidence that you have the whole kingdom of heaven to aid you.

Arise from your troubles, temptations, and sufferings, and do not fear. Take up your cross and follow Jesus, because He is leading you to an even more glorious transfiguration. When Christ

comes down from the cloud as Judge, and all the nations and their kings tremble with fear and fall on their faces, everyone who has listened to Jesus' Word will be called up. They will see His face shining like the sun and not be afraid. And they will be transformed with new glorious bodies and reflect God's perfect holiness. They will join Moses and Elijah, Peter, James, and John, and ascend the mountain to the throne of God in new creation and reign with Christ forever and ever.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! Alleluia! Tell everyone the message until the Son of Man comes again in glory. Amen.