

Sunday next Before Lent 2017

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of our Lord

Transfiguration. What does it mean? Trans, as in, change – figure, as in figure or appearance. Jesus' appearance changes on the mountain. And we mark this unusual event every year with a special Sunday at the end of the Epiphany season and right before Lent.

So why the change? And what does this have to do with you and me? As the three apostles have front row seats to this miraculous sign, we sit and peek over their shoulder this morning, ponder the meaning of the Transfiguration. And be encouraged with them, for here we come to the mountain, yet we may not remain...

First, let's recall the context of this event. Jesus had less than a week before pointedly revealed to his disciples that he was the Christ! And he immediately started to tell them what that meant – that he would go to Jerusalem, that he would suffer and die. Mark tells us, “he spoke about this plainly”. But the disciples didn't want to hear it, and Peter tried to rebuke him. “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus told him, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man!”

And then he told them, “some standing here today will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom”.

With these words hanging in the air for just 6 days, the very next thing the Gospel writers detail is the Transfiguration.

In those six days, we can only wonder what ran through those disciples' minds. Was the truth about Jesus starting to sink in? That he

was a suffering Messiah, not a triumphant conqueror? Were they perhaps becoming doubtful about him? What's this crazy talk about death and resurrection, anyway? And what did he mean by they will see him coming in his kingdom?

Sometimes we get it right, like Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Sometimes we get it wrong like Peter, thinking we know better than our Lord. Sometimes, we just don't get it.

We look at ourselves and see something far from the glory that shines in Christ. We are the opposite of the mountaintop, we are the depths and chasms, wallowing in our misery. Oh, to even be in the presence of such glory – we can see why Peter wanted to build some tents and stay awhile.

So then, the transfiguration. A high mountain, Peter, James and John. Jesus' appearance changes – dazzling white glory – they get a glimpse behind the veil of his humility. After all, he truly is God of God and Light of Light. Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, all the Old Testament scriptures testifying to Jesus as Lord. To cap it all, the voice from heaven, God's own voice, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.”.

And so what does he say? “The Son of man will go up to Jerusalem, and suffer and die, and be raised again.” He speaks the Gospel! This great event, this mountaintop experience, this bright shining moment is great and all, but it's nothing compared to the glory yet to come. It's nothing compared to the day, the Friday that Jesus has in mind, and the Sunday morning to follow. There, on that mountain called Calvary, Jesus would come into his kingdom. And John, who had a front row seat to the transfiguration, will also stand at the foot

of the cross.

There Jesus will be stripped of all earthly dignity, rather than clothed in glory. There Jesus will be flanked by common thieves, not great men of faith. There darkness will blot out the sun, rather than radiance shining forth. There no one would say, “it is good to be here, let's build some tents and stay a while”. There, God would not consider Jesus his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased, but instead, he would forsake him who was made to become sin for us.

But listen to him. What he says there, on the cross, matters even more. Forgive them. You will be with me in paradise. It is finished.

The transfiguration of our Lord – it shows Jesus glory. It gives the disciples, and us, just a peek of what our eyes cannot see – that this Jesus is indeed the Son of God. The voice of the Father confirms it. But this mountaintop experience isn't the goal. It simply prepares us for that other mountain, where Jesus does what he really came to do – die for sinners like us. Knowing his true identity is important to understanding that death – that the God made flesh dies for all people – it's foundational to our faith. It's the heart and center of it all.

What does the transfiguration mean to us? It means that Jesus Christ is the Light of Light and very God of very God - he has and deserves all the glory. But it means that the cross matters all the more – that his suffering and death for us are all the better – because he is who he is. The transfiguration reminds us that it's not just anyone who dies for us – but God's own Son. The transfiguration, a picture of glory, actually points us away from such glory to the darkness and scandal of the cross. There is God's kind of glory – a power made perfect in weakness – a salvation through suffering – sweet life for all won by

a bitter death for him.

Finally, the transfiguration gives us a hint of that kingdom that is yet to come – the kingdom of glory, when we will see Christ as he truly is, when he comes to raise us up forever. Then, we too will be like him, glorified. Then, we will be transfigured – changed – made perfect – body and soul forever. The transfiguration is Christ as he truly is – but it's also a glimpse of our future in him.

Until then, the glory remains hidden. The promise is heard but not seen. He comes to us humbly, still –in the bread and wine, by the water of baptism and in the Gospels. His kingdom comes to us today – forgiving us, renewing us and transfiguring us by faith.

Amen.