

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

The Transfiguration of our Lord

February 27, 2022

Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

It is good for us to be here.

About eight days after he said these words, Jesus took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white. Just then, two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him! They appeared in glory and were talking about his departure, which he was going to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem.

Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep, but when they were completely awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him.

As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let’s make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not realize what he was saying.

While he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them. They were afraid as they went into the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” After the voice had spoken, they found Jesus alone. They kept this secret and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

—Luke 9:28-36

You have heard the latest news this week: Russia has invaded Ukraine. Those countries are now in a war with each other. The United States has imposed sanctions on Russia, but I wonder how far this will go. Do you wonder the same thing? I wonder if this be the start of World War III? How heavily will our armed forces get involved in this situation? Will we see a nuclear war take place? All of that is unknown. But I can’t help but speculate on the outcome of the situation in Ukraine. We have brothers and sisters in the Lutheran Church of Ukraine that are facing the horror of war in their country. How many people are going to lose their lives? How close will this get to you and me? Is this what Jesus will use to bring about Judgment Day? How close are we to the end of the world? I have a lot of questions about what I am seeing and hearing in Ukraine. Perhaps you do too. And a lot of this can make us uneasy, anxious, concerned. The world has a lot of crazy people in leadership positions right now, people who hold a lot of power and control. And how they use that power and control is not always in the best interest of people. I have a lot of concerns about what is happening in our world right now.

Therefore, I’m glad we have this text and this focus before us today. It is Transfiguration Sunday, and we have the opportunity to climb the mountain with Peter, James, John, and Jesus. We get to see Jesus transfigured right before their eyes, and with all the things happening in our world, it’s good to say with Peter, **“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”** Let’s look at why that is true. The apostle Luke is the one who shares these truths with us today. Matthew and Mark also write about this event, and it is thought that John even alludes to it when he writes, **“The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We have seen his glory, the glory he has as the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (John 1:14). Peter refers to this event in his second epistle when he writes, **“To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father, when the voice came to him from within the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We heard this voice, which came out of heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain”** (2 Peter 1:16-18). So, this transfiguration of our Lord is a big deal. It’s mentioned many times by the apostles.

In Luke’s Gospel, he starts to tell us about what happened in this way: **“About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.”** Let me remind you of what Luke is referring to. Eight days earlier, Jesus is with his disciples, and he asks them a question. **“Who do people say I am?”** The disciples answered him with things they’ve heard. Some said he was John the Baptist. Others said he was Elijah. And still others said he was one of the prophets. Jesus then got specific with his disciples. Well, what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am? Peter the spokesman for the group said, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”** It was a beautiful statement of faith. You are the Promised Savior. You are the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

Well, Jesus goes on to describe what that meant. A lot of people had different ideas of what the Messiah would come to do. Even the disciples were looking for a king who would come and bring world peace. Wouldn’t that be great? Jesus would establish world peace. No more wars. Everybody would get along. But Jesus describes for them a different Messiah. He went on and told them what kind of Christ, Messiah, he would be. He told them that he *must* go to Jerusalem, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. It was necessary for him to do that. And then Jesus also taught his disciples what that would mean for *them*. He said that if they (if we) were to come after him, we must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him. Jesus asks, “What good is it for a person to gain the whole world ... all its treasures and wealth and glory ... to have everything in your possession, and yet forfeit your soul?” It’s not worth it at all. Jesus was teaching his disciples these things. He was teaching them these difficult lessons for living in this world.

About eight days after those teachings, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him up this mountain to pray. They were worn out, tired, exhausted. And he takes them on this mountain to pray. It's a great place to pray. It's quiet. You can see the beauty of God's creation. Jesus and his disciples were praying together to God the Father. But then things started to happen. Just imagine this. You are on the mountain with Jesus, away from the stresses and pressures of the world below. Corrupt leaders and national powers are flexing their muscles down below. But you are on the mountain with Jesus. Nobody is around. You are all alone with Jesus. And then something astonishing happens. **"While Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothing became dazzling white."** Now think about how the disciples usually saw Jesus. Did Jesus walk around flexing his muscles and displaying his power? No. Oh, sure, he did miracles, but he wasn't interested in showing off his power. In fact, when he did most of his miracles, he told people not to tell anybody about it. Did Jesus strut around town with the most fashionable clothes? No. People like that lived in palaces. Jesus didn't even have a house of his own. Did he walk with his nose up in the air? No. The Pharisees enjoyed that attitude. Not Jesus. He was very humble and gentle. In fact, we get the picture from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus wasn't anything special from an outward viewpoint. Isaiah wrote, **"He has no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."**

Generally speaking, Jesus wasn't too much to look at. He was a normal man with normal characteristics. But on that mountain, we see Jesus for who he really is. He is the almighty, glorious God who created all things, including the sun that burns so brightly. And on that mountain, his heavenly glory burns through his earthly humility. Light that is brighter than the sun pours from his pores. That would be terrifying to see, wouldn't it? How would you react if my face started changing right here? Oh, my face can easily turn red. I often get comments that I must have been in the sun. But what if light brighter than the sun came from my face. What if my clothes started changing? What if my robe became bright like lightning? You'd be terrified, wouldn't you? A similar thing happened to Moses in our first reading today, and all the people were like, "Whoa! Stand clear of Moses." If we saw this happening, we'd be terrified, too. Peter, James, and John saw Jesus in the brilliance of his glory. They saw Jesus for who he really is. They saw Jesus' glory shine forth. It broke out of his earthly disguise. That's an unbelievable sight. But that's not all they saw.

"Just then, two men, Moses and Elijah, were talking with him! They appeared in glory and were talking about his departure, which he was going to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem." I'm not going to talk a lot about Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus on that mountain right now. There are a lot of intriguing things we could discuss, but for now, let it suffice to say that these Old Testament giants who were in heaven appeared with Jesus on that mountain. That's pretty cool. And Luke tells us what they were talking about. They were talking to Jesus about his departure, which he was going to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem. These Old Testament prophets were proof that Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection were God's plan. It was just as Jesus told his disciples eight days earlier. **"I must go to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again."** Think of it. Jesus' work for us was so important that Moses and Elijah, citizens of heaven, couldn't wait to talk about it on earth. Centuries earlier, their entire ministries here on earth centered on this event: Jesus' departure from this world, Jesus' death and resurrection. Yes, Jesus is the King of glory. Yes, Jesus has all the glory and power and might. But the one who shines in glory on the mountaintop is the one who *must* climb the hill of death carrying a cross. It's exactly what Jesus was talking about eight days earlier with his disciples. Now he was talking about it with Moses and Elijah.

You see, the transfiguration gives us that balanced, biblical view of Jesus. We are coming up on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, this week. Transfiguration is a permanent reminder for you and for me that Jesus went the way of the cross *not* because he was helpless, but because in all of his glory, he chose to do that for you and for me. Keep this image of Jesus in your mind as we walk through Lent. The glorious Lord Jesus loved the world enough to hide his glory. Keep this image of Jesus in your mind as you look at what is happening in our world. When things look bleak and grim, remember Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Remember that he is the glorious Son of God who deeply loves the people of this world.

So let me ask you a question. How do you like to picture Jesus? Do you like to picture Jesus as the little baby boy asleep on the hay in Bethlehem? So cute and so cuddly, but not anyone that I really need to take too seriously? Or do you like to picture Jesus beaten and bloodied and placed on a cross where he dies? Well, that might actually make us feel a bit uncomfortable, especially as we remember why he is there. Or maybe you like to see Jesus in all his glory. Jesus, the King of the universe, is King of my heart. Peter liked *that* picture of Jesus. **"Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep, but when they were completely awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good for us to be here. Let's make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not realize what he was saying."** Now Peter may not have known what he was saying, but he certainly knew what he was seeing. And he liked it. He loved being in the presence of Jesus this way. It was great. It was like being in heaven without having to die first. So, Peter just wanted to stretch out that experience a little bit more. **"Master, Lord, it's good for us to be here."**

But God had other plans. **"While he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them. They were afraid as they went into the cloud. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!'"** God had other plans. *"Peter, you can't stay here. Remember? Do you remember what my Son told you eight days ago? You can't stay here. Your little pup tents aren't included in my plans. Listen to Jesus!"* He said, **"I must go to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again."** It was necessary to leave that mountain of glory.

What would have happened if God said, "Peter, that's a great idea. Let's just stay here." What would be the result of that? You and I couldn't be in his glory. We would be stuck in our sinfulness. We would have to stand before God on our own with all our sins and rebellion. There would be no hope. No life. No forgiveness. No payment for sin. God has a better plan. Jesus *must* go down from the mountain. He cannot stay there. Jesus *must* go down the mountain of glory so that he can climb the mountain of death. He must trade the company of Moses and Elijah for the company of mocking and spitting soldiers. He must turn in garments that shine like the sun for garments that would be gambled over at the foot of the cross. His brilliance must be hidden under shame and agony. And why must he do that? Because it is the only way for you and for me to stand with him in his glory forever.

My friends, it is good for us to be here today. It's good for us to be with Jesus today and see him in his glory. It's good for us to remind ourselves who Jesus is as the glorious Son of the living God. It is good for us to see what is waiting for us in heaven with all the other believers. We are going to be with Jesus in his glorious presence forever. I can't wait. I wish he would come right now and take us to himself. Don't you? Right now. No more pain and difficulties in life. No more warfare and potential difficulties. Let's just stay in the glorious presence of our Beautiful Savior. Let's just stay here on the mountain away from all the problems of the world. Wouldn't that be great?

But we can't. We can't stand here on this mountain, not yet. We must walk down. We must go through the valley of the cross. We must see opportunities to deny ourselves and to follow our Savior who came to this world for the world. Not only was it necessary for *Jesus* to leave that mountain, it is necessary for *us* to leave this place. Why? Because the people in this broken and hurting world need you. They need me. They need us to confidently share the truth of Jesus. He is still in charge of this world. But at times his power and glory are hidden because he is at work bringing salvation to this world. We are the ones whom Jesus wants to share that message. Jesus wants us to do that, and we listen to him.

But as you do that, you do not have to be afraid. Even though we can't stay in the glorious presence of Jesus right now and even though we need to face problems and hardships in our world, we know something that makes it possible for us to face the world. As we leave this place and go back into the world, we can pray with the hymn writer, "**How good, Lord, to be here! Yet we may not remain; But since you bid us leave the mount, Come with us to the plain.**" And Jesus, our risen and glorified Savior says, "I am with you now and always. Now get up and let's go." And we can. We can confidently and peacefully face this world, because, as we sang in our first hymn: "Christ is with me." Amen.