

Matthew 17:1–9
Transfiguration
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
January 29, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

The season of Epiphany is all about the revealing of the man Jesus Christ to be the Lord of all things, that Jesus is both true man and true God. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the climax and final Sunday of the Epiphany season. Today we see clearly that the Son of Mary is also the Son of God as our Lord Jesus Christ reveals His divine glory to Peter, James, and John—and to us—on the mount of Transfiguration. This morning we see that Jesus reveals His otherwise hidden, divine glory to His disciples to prepare them for the trials and tribulations to come. Jesus also gives us a glimpse of His resurrection glory before we accompany Him through His suffering and cross to the joys of Easter morning.

Six days before Transfiguration, Peter famously confessed of Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” God the Father had revealed this truth to Peter, but Peter didn’t understand the full picture yet. Peter knew who Jesus was, but he was not clear on what Jesus came to do. Jesus began showing Peter and the other disciples that He must suffer, be killed, and on the third day rise from the dead. But Peter couldn’t accept that. He set his mind on the things of man, on the glory of this age and what Jesus could do for him now, rather than on the things of God. Peter wanted glory now, not suffering and the cross. He was not ready to deny himself and take up his cross to follow Jesus.

So Jesus takes His closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain to reveal to them His true divine glory, to give them something to hold onto in the midst of suffering.

There, Jesus was transformed before them. His face shone as bright as the sun and His clothes were dazzling white, as light, yet not like anything of this world. Nothing on earth compares to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. He shares in the divine glory of the Father and the Holy Spirit, the glory of the Holy Trinity in all eternity. Jesus shares in the glory of the God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16).

The glory of God is so indescribably great that in the Old Testament, God conceals His glory within a cloud, which appeared like a devouring fire on top of Mount Sinai (Ex 24:16–17). The Lord said to Moses: “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever” (Ex 19:9). This glory of God was then reflected in Moses’ face when he came down from the mountain, so bright that he had to put a veil over his face to speak with the people (Ex 34:29). The prophet Elijah also encountered God on Mount Sinai, this time concealed not in the strong wind, or the earthquake, or in the fire, but in the sound of a low whisper (1 Kg 19:12). The LORD spoke to both Moses and Elijah on Mount Sinai, and here they appear again on a mountain, with their Lord Jesus Christ, discussing His exodus from this world, His death and resurrection.

The disciples, of course, were terrified at the glory of the LORD. Peter didn’t know what to say, so he awkwardly suggested building three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, as if he could make this glory last. And then the bright cloud of glory overshadowed them and the voice of God was heard, just like at the Baptism of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.” Of course, the disciples could do nothing but fall on their faces in fear. Here they were in the presence of God’s glory, nearer than any sinful man ought to stand before the consuming fire of our God.

But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” The glory of God is too much for us sinners to handle, but Jesus shields us from the fire of God’s wrath. Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature (Heb 1:3). He was in the form of God, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant in His incarnation. Only Jesus, the God-man, can stand between us sinners and the holy God. He took our human nature upon Himself to redeem our human nature from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus took our sins upon Himself and nailed our debt to the cross (Col 2:14). We can always approach God without fear because Jesus took upon Himself God’s wrath against us. He is always at the Father’s right hand interceding on our behalf. There’s no need to be afraid. The disciples lifted up their eyes and saw no one but Jesus only, appearing again in the form of a servant. God did not come in His wrath to destroy us. He came in His mercy to save us.

So why does Jesus show His glory to these disciples, and why does He show His glory in this way? He already proved He is God with His many signs and miracles, with His authoritative teaching and work. That’s what we see throughout the Epiphany season. The man Jesus Christ is also the Lord over all things. The reason Jesus reveals His otherwise hidden divine glory to Peter, James, and John is to prepare them for the trials and tribulations to come. After coming down the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus sets His face towards Jerusalem, where He will be crucified for the sins of the world.

On the night He was betrayed, our Lord took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Peter, James, and John, the same three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, accompanied Jesus deeper into the garden. There, Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled, saying: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt 26:38). That very night, our Lord was handed over to the authorities, unjustly tried, and condemned to death. Jesus knew Peter, James,

and John would see His sorrow, and so He prepares them at the Transfiguration by showing a glimpse of Heaven and the glory that will come in His resurrection from the dead.

In so many ways the Transfiguration is the opposite of what was to come on Mount Calvary. On the Mount of Transfiguration, our Lord's clothing shone brighter than anything on earth. On Mount Calvary, our Lord was stripped naked, with Roman soldiers casting lots for His clothes. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appeared between Moses and Elijah. On Mount Calvary, He was nailed to a cross between two criminals. On the Mount of Transfiguration there appeared a bright cloud. On Mount Calvary, darkness reigned. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father said: "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him." On Mount Calvary, Jesus said: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appeared in all His glory. On Mount Calvary, Jesus appears in weakness and suffering, shame and death.

The reason we celebrate the Transfiguration on this last Sunday of Epiphany is to prepare us for what's to come. Next week we begin the season of Pre-Lent and then Lent, our descent down the mountain as we journey with our Lord towards Jerusalem for Holy Week and Good Friday. The glory and the joy of the Transfiguration are a glimpse of Heaven to get us through the days of self-denial and suffering that lay ahead as we take up our cross and follow Jesus towards His cross. But then comes the Resurrection, the celebration of Easter, when we see Jesus once again in all His divine glory!

In a way we see this same cycle of glory and bearing our cross every week. We come to God's house and gather with God's people to receive refreshment from God's Word and in God's Sacraments. Every time we gather to receive His gifts, the Lord is giving us the strength we need, a little glimpse of Heaven, to get us through our day to day lives of suffering and self-denial. In a sense, every celebration of the Lord's Supper is like the Transfiguration, where

Jesus comes to us in His veiled glory and says: “Rise, and have no fear. I forgive you all your sins. Go in peace.” We receive a glimpse of the resurrection to come before we head down the mountain and into the valley of the shadow of death. But remember, Jesus goes with us. He comes down with us from the mountain. He comes with us all the way through our earthly lives, until that day when we dwell in the house of the Lord forever in the new Heavens and the new Earth. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.