

Matthew 17:1–9  
Transfiguration  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
January 21, 2024

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,

It wasn't long before the people of Israel fell right back into the filth from which they had been saved. When things got tough, God's chosen people soon scorned the Lord's provision and looked back to the fleshpots of Egypt. God led the people of Israel to Mount Sinai and Moses ascended the mountain to receive God's Law, but upon his return, Moses found Aaron and all the people worshipping a false god of their own making, the golden calf. God was ready to destroy the people, but Moses stepped in as a mediator, reminding the LORD of His promises (Ex 32:13), seeking atonement for the sins of the people (Ex 32:30), and interceding on their behalf (Ex 33:12).

Moses would meet with God in the tent of meeting, where the LORD would "speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to His friend" (Ex 33:11). And the LORD promised Moses: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33:14). Moses then takes it one step further and says: "Please, show me your glory." God says: "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33:19–20).

Moses ascended Mount Sinai yet again, with fresh tablets of stone, to receive God's Law for the people directly from the hand of the Lawgiver. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with Moses, proclaiming the name of the LORD. And God shielded Moses from the

fullness of divine glory by hiding Moses in the cleft of a rock. Moses only saw the LORD's backside, but not His face.

For forty days and forty nights, Moses fasted from food and water as he received the Law a second time from the LORD. When Moses descended Mount Sinai yet again, the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God, so Aaron and all the people were afraid to come near him. Sinners are terrified when they stand in the presence of God's holiness, even when that holiness is just reflected. But Moses called to Aaron, the other leaders, and the people of Israel, and when he had finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face to conceal that reflected glory of the LORD. Whenever Moses went to speak to the LORD he would remove the veil, and when he came back to the people he would veil his face again. Unholy people cannot bear to be in the presence of the holy God, even when that holiness is mediated.

Now fast forward to our Gospel lesson for this feast of the Transfiguration. Like Moses, Jesus ascended the mountain and took with Him Peter, James, and John to pray (Lk 9:28). These are Jesus's closest disciples, the inner ring, the same disciples who would later go with Jesus deeper than the others into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Up on the mountain, Jesus was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. "Transfiguration" is the Latin term. In Greek, it's metamorphosis, a change of form. The disciples knew Jesus well and they knew He is a worker of miracles. But here, at the Transfiguration, Jesus shows forth His true glory in all its splendor. This is the ultimate Epiphany, the ultimate revealing of who Jesus is. The disciples were used to seeing the man, Jesus, but here that man Jesus pulls back the veil and reveals the splendor of majesty He conceals.

Jesus is both God and man. We say it over and over again in the Church. We hear the account of the incarnation at Christmas and speak of seeing God face to face in the Christchild of Bethlehem. He reveals His glory in various ways and means throughout His earthly ministry. But this appearance is unique. The Transfiguration offers Jesus's closest disciples and us a look at what that glory of God in the man, Jesus, is like. Jesus offers a glimpse of His true divine glory to prepare His disciples for what is coming in His impending death.

Have you ever tried looking at the sun? It's a painful experience that can cause permanent damage to your eyes. Yet grade school boys can't help but take a peek. And even if you can bear it for a second or two, you can't actually see the sun because it's too bright. With the special glasses to watch a solar eclipse, or when the sun is hidden behind clouds in just the right way, you can make out the size of the sun, which appears to us the exact same size as a full moon. That's because although the sun is 400 times larger than the moon, it's also 400 times farther away. But when you can see the contours of the sun, you cannot see its full splendor. And when you see its full splendor, you can't see its contours.

The face of Jesus shone as the sun and His clothes became white as light. The Gospel of Mark says that "His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). This is not like Moses, whose face shone because He spoke with God. This is the glory of God revealed in the man, Jesus Christ. This is the one who spoke with Moses on the mountain, the Sun of righteousness, whom sinful man cannot bear to gaze upon. He is the one who makes the face of Moses shine, the one spoken of by all the prophets and the one who spoke through all the prophets.

And then Moses and Elijah appear, talking with Jesus. St. Luke tells us they were speaking of our Lord's departure, His exodus, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

They were speaking about Jesus's death on the cross, where He would lead His people out of bondage. In the Old Testament, Moses spoke with God face to face and he continues doing so here. In the Old Testament, the Word of the LORD came to Elijah and spoke to Him. The LORD had passed by Elijah and tore the mountains with a strong wind, but the LORD was not in the wind. And then in an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake in a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. When Elijah heard the whisper, He wrapped his face in His cloak because he knew he was in the presence of God (1 Kg 19). So both Moses and Elijah stood in God's presence in the Old Testament and they stand in God's presence again here on the mount of Transfiguration, speaking with God in the flesh about what they had prophesied concerning God in the flesh: His death and resurrection.

Peter was amazed and thought he could make the moment last forever. He offered to build three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. And while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." That's how it went at the Baptism of Jesus too: God the Father speaking from Heaven, saying "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Interesting how a bright cloud "overshadowed" them. That word "overshadow" is used of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, when the angel said to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35). At the Baptism of Jesus and here on the mount of Transfiguration, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity, reveals Himself.

When the disciples heard the voice of God, they fell on their faces and were terrified, just as the people in the Old Testament were terrified of God in His glory. Remember, sinful man

cannot stand in the presence of God and live because the holiness of God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). The glory of the LORD is too much for Peter, James, and John, so they fell on their faces and were terrified. The glory of the LORD is too much for sinners of any kind, then or now. But where is the falling to the ground in fear today? Most people, if they think of God at all, think of Him as either distant and having nothing to do with our daily life. Even in the Church, people think of God as tame, as a loving, grandfather-like figure. But that's not how the Scriptures speak of sinners standing before the holy and perfect God, the maker and sustainer of all things. The LORD consumes sinners, and yet we take our sins lightly.

For those who don't recognize their sin or the damnation they deserve according to the Scriptures, our God will be like a consuming fire and destroy them in the end. But for those who recognize how incapable they are of standing on their own before God, Jesus comes to them as He comes to Peter, James, and John, touching them and saying: "Rise and have no fear." He comes to you in the Sacraments: in Holy Baptism and in the Lord's Supper, where He tangibly reminds you of His saving presence. He comes to you in His Word, where He says: "Rise and have no fear. I was consumed by God's wrath in your place on the cross. But I rose from the dead." In Jesus, you are a beloved child of God, with whom God the Father is now pleased. Jesus says to you everyday: "Rise, and have no fear."

In Jesus Christ, we behold the glory of God. In Him is light, and that light is the life of men. His light no longer destroys us or consumes us; it enlightens our understanding and transforms us by the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2). In His light we see light (Ps 36:9). Our minds are no longer hardened to the Scriptures because Christ has removed the veil of Moses. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we behold the glory of the Lord in His Word with unveiled face, being transformed into His image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:14–18). And then

in eternity, we will see His face, and His name will be on our foreheads, as it already is now in Baptism. . . The LORD God will be our light, and we will reign with Him forever (Rev 22:4–5).

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 Creed.