

## The Transfiguration of Our Lord • February 26, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 17:1-9 (Exodus 24:8-18)

“Join Me On The Mountain”

Back before my first year of college, the university offered a program that invited incoming students to spend a week backpacking through Pisgah National Forest. One goal of this program was to get us new first-years getting to know each other, working together in challenging situations; it also introduced me to the experience of making my way through a wilderness as we hiked through the mountains and forests of western North Carolina. It didn't take all that long to figure out that we'd get the best view of the world around us when we were up on the top of the summits. Up there, we could both witness a bit of the majesty of God's creation and take time to scope out the lay of the land around us. We could see where we were headed, getting a sense of the challenges that we'd be encountering on the path ahead of us.

Up on the mountain, you can see and hear all kinds of things you'd miss down in the lowlands. When you're on a trail in a pretty dense forest, surrounded by trees and slopes, you've got to focus on the path right ahead of you. If you don't, you might stumble on roots or rocks, slip on loose gravel or slick mud, or – as I was rudely reminded on a few occasions – get smacked in the face by a low branch or shrub. Up on the mountain, you don't have to spend your time dealing with those distractions. You have the opportunity to devote your attention to the reason you came up the mountain in the first place. It can be an amazing experience. It was for me. When the time came to leave the mountain in order to continue on our trek, I felt that I had a both a better sense of where we were going and a renewed appreciation of the purpose of all that hiking.

Today's a good day to be up on a mountain. God invited Moses, Aaron and his sons, and seventy elders of Israel to come up a mountain. Moses and the rest got to see God Himself, eating and drinking in His presence – and lived to tell the tale! God called Moses further up the mountain and, six days later, the man that God had chosen to lead His people out from Egypt had a personal audience with the Almighty. Jesus took Peter, James, and John along with him on a hike up another high mountain, where they got to see their Teacher in his divine glory – with their legendary ancestors in faith, Moses and Elijah, thrown in! Good stuff happened on those mountains.

Imagine that you're up there on the mount of the Transfiguration with those three disciples. The glory of God the Son is lighting up the mountaintop. Peter, James, and John witness the royal splendor of the one that they had recently confessed to be the Christ (Matt. 16:16) and then almost immediately rebuked for saying that he should have to suffer and die. Seeing Jesus transfigured must have been a joyful vindication in and of itself – yes, he is the Christ! But then Moses and Elijah appear and begin to have a conversation with Jesus. Who could have expected that? The three disciples must have been amazed beyond understanding. Of course they'd just wait and watch as this glorious vision unfolded, right? Wouldn't you?

Not Peter. Peter interrupts the holy conversation so that he might tell Jesus something to the effect of, “Lord, this is good stuff!” In doing so, Peter probably earned the distinction of being the greatest “Captain Obvious” in all of Scripture. What might be even worse, though, is that Peter goes on to make the offer to build three (presumably equivalent) shelters for these people he'd interrupted, inadvertently lumping Jesus in with the two sainted men of biblical history. But Jesus isn't on the same level as Moses or Elijah. He's far greater.

Almost as soon as the words left Peter's enthusiastic lips, the interrupter becomes the interrupt-ee. The same God who called Moses up into the cloud at Mount Sinai now speaks again from the cloud, echoing the words He spoke at Jesus' baptism – words which we heard back at the beginning of this Epiphany season – “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” That's what causes the disciples, Peter included, to fall to the ground in reverent fear. *Listen to him.* Stop speaking and telling him what you think is good for him and for you. *Listen.* Pay attention to Jesus, the Christ, even over and above the great figures of the Old Testament. Jesus is the one it's all about!

Like Peter, are you telling Jesus what *you* think is good, rather than listening to what he has to say? You might have some well-intentioned ideas about how you think life should be, or just what God should be doing to make the world a better place. But like Peter, if you're telling God what's good – either by your words or your actions – when you should be listening to Him to learn what's really good, you're just setting

yourself up for a fall. That's what sin does to us human beings. Peter, you, and I all get to thinking we should be the ones telling God how things should be, not the other way around.

We need to go to the Mount of Transfiguration. So did Peter, James, and John. Seeing Jesus, hearing the Father, they got to take in the majesty of God's glory and, in so doing, were given greater appreciation of the purpose of everything they'd been doing. Jesus knew the lay of the land and the challenges that lay ahead for himself and his disciples. As he'd told them before going up the mountain, the way of the cross stretched before him. The Son of God would give his life for people who'd rather speak than listen to God. The way of the cross lay ahead for his disciples, if they would follow Jesus. It must. And as you and I look out from the Mount of Transfiguration today, our path leads to the cross, too.

We're about to enter into the season of Lent on the church's calendar. Today, we bid farewell to the joyous refrain of "alleluia," setting it aside to remember just why the Son of God has come into our world. Starting with Ash Wednesday, this will be a time for you and me to look ahead to Jesus' suffering and death for our sake. We'll be reflecting on what the life of discipleship is under the way of the cross in a world that rejects Jesus and those who would follow him. Hard times and challenges lay ahead for Christ's disciples. But remember what we've seen on the mountain: Jesus is the Son of God, and his reign has already broken in to our world. Elijah proclaimed the coming reign of God in days of old, but in Jesus the fulfillment has come. As God's people in Christ, you are a part of His kingdom and already get to experience His presence on the mountain.

Today, Jesus is calling you to come and join him on the mountain. Come to the Lord's Supper today to eat and drink with God to receive strength for your journey as a disciple. Come to eat and drink God as you receive Christ's body and blood, through which He equips you for your journey on the way of the cross. Come to the mountain where you will get a glimpse of God's majestic glory, given and shed for you to give you life. Come and with Peter, James, and John, fix your eyes on Jesus. See him and take courage for the path ahead.

Pisgah National Forest takes its name from the Hebrew word for "summit" or "mountaintop." Before the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, God called Moses up "to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho." (Deut. 34:1) From that mountaintop, God showed Moses the good land that lay ahead for his people, their long-promised inheritance, even though Moses would never enter into it. We get to go down from the mountain. We get to enter into our inheritance of restored, eternal life with Jesus. And we get to share it with all those who would listen to him as their Lord and Savior.

You and I need to go to the Mount of Transfiguration, but we also need to move on from it. And going on into all those places where God has placed you – work, school, family, community – you go as one who has seen the glory of God's grace revealed in Christ. You've seen that it's all about Jesus. He's the one who has come; he's the one who's at work to bring our broken world back to his Father. Listen to Jesus as you go, engaging with his Word. Watch your path ahead to see God's reigning at work around you. Keep your head up for opportunities to pray for your neighbor, to do good to your neighbor, to be speaking with people who don't know Jesus. Listen to Jesus and follow him. Go on the way of the cross, knowing that you do not go alone.

So come, join me on the mountain. And then go from it, ready for the journey ahead.

Amen.