

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Transfiguration of our Lord
February 26, 2006
Mark 9:2-9

“Jesus Shines Brighter”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Last Tuesday late in the afternoon I was on my way to a meeting over in the school library and I took a shortcut through the church. I came into the sanctuary and was stopped short. There were no lights on but it was literally glowing in here. The afternoon sun was just at the right place, the lighting conditions were perfect, and the place was aglow. The western window was literally flaming red and the other stained glass windows on the west side were contributing their light to the scene. It would be hard to explain it exactly but you could almost see the light filling the sanctuary. The thought struck me, how very fitting it was to be in the church in such light in the week before the Transfiguration. I only wished that there were others around to see it. But this was only a condition caused by the position of the sun and the time of the day. How much more glorious was the light that shone on the disciples, Peter, James, and John, on that day when they stood on the mountain. Now this event might not seem to have much relevance for us today, but as our theme for this day would remind us: Jesus Shines Brighter. May the Holy Spirit use His Word to bless our meditation on these thoughts today.

I. Transfiguration

The observance on the last week of the Epiphany season of the Transfiguration of our Lord was for some time a distinctively Lutheran practice. The other Protestant churches which use the lectionary series have followed in the practice. But the Roman Catholic Church does not observe this day. Nevertheless it is an important and meaningful day to remember. For many years as well the hymn “Beautiful Savior” came to be associated with this day. In recent years, we have probably not sung this hymn as much on Transfiguration Sunday as in the past. This year I was thinking about that when Mr. Kohrs also suggested that we sing it as part of the service. So we have sung it as the hymn of the day, and as you may be aware our theme for today comes from stanza 3 which we just sang:

Fair is the sunshine, fair is the moonlight
Bright the sparkling stars on high.
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer,
Than all the angels in the sky.

Jesus shines brighter. In those words is a very concise summary of what greeted the disciples on that mountain. Jesus took the three of them (Peter, James, and John) up on a high mountaintop. There they were alone. And as the Gospel of Mark simply and directly relates: “There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” The Gospel of Matthew relates that his face shone

like the sun. These words all are attempting to portray the fact that Jesus was glorified before them. The glory that was his before the foundation of the world, shone forth. The glory that was hidden in his humility, in his human body briefly shone forth. It was a sign to the disciples of the true majesty and glory of the Son. St. Peter himself would write in his second letter: "We were eyewitnesses of his majesty." And St. John would proclaim: "We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father ..."

Not only did Jesus change before them, but he was accompanied by others as well. Elijah and Moses were present with the Lord. These two great heroes and saints of the Old Testament were there talking with Jesus. Their presence on the mountain is the reason that in our other lessons today as we are reminded of Elijah's glorious translation into heaven with the chariots of fire and the whirlwind. St. Paul speaks on the fact that though Moses' words are veiled, even as he wore a veil to hide the fact that the glory of the Lord was fading from his face. But apostle continues, "we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." It would appear he has in mind the transfiguration as well.

II. "Listen to Him"

Of course, there was more to the Transfiguration than that. Peter is carried away by the event to the point that he suggests the construction of three shelters – one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. He says, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here ..." But his words are literally overshadowed by the cloud of glory which covers them and the voice which speaks from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" The same voice that spoke at the Baptism of Jesus speaks again. The blessing of the Father is again proclaimed. And the command is given: "Listen to him." For in the words of Jesus are spirit and life. In the teaching of Jesus is the way of God. In the account of the Transfiguration in the Gospel it is stated that "when they looked around they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus". Only Jesus remained with them. In these words is a reminder to us that in our spiritual lives we need to keep ourselves focused in just one direction. We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. In listening to His words we do just that.

There are so many other words around that people seek to listen to. There are so many other voices that are raised in this time. The voices seem tempting at times. They seem to make sense. They are voices that would even call us to follow other paths. Please permit this one example. A member sent me an article this past week about an area congregation where the pastor had used his Sunday morning sermon to present the case for evolution and against creationism and intelligent design. He decried the "fundamentalism" as he called it which would endanger scientific research, etc. Now, there is someone who is not hearing the voice of Jesus in his word. And the tragedy is he is using his position in the church to deceive and confuse others. And the voice from heaven on the mountain still cries: "Listen to Him."

III. Journey to Lent

Last Tuesday, I would have stayed in the church longer to experience that wondrous light, but it was beginning to fade (the sun was lower in the sky) and I was already late for the meeting I needed to be at. In our journey to the mountain we have seen Jesus shine brighter ... than all the angels in the sky. But with the disciples we must come down from the mountain. Unlike them, we do not have to refrain from telling anyone until the Son of Man is risen from the dead. But we must take the next part of the journey as well.

The coming days bring us once again to the season of Lent. We are reminded of the road that the Lord took for us. You have listed in your bulletin the schedule for our services during Lent. The midweek theme for this year fits well with the words of the Father from the mountain today. For we will consider the theme: Truly, the Son of God! from the viewpoint of some of the individuals who came into contact with our Lord in his journey to the cross. The season of Lent is a reminder that we cannot remain on the mountain of transfiguration. We must journey with our Lord to the cross. For it is there that our salvation has been won. But the journey does not end at the cross either. For the glory of Easter shines bright as well. At the close of the service this day, we will "retire" the singing of Alleluia until Easter morning. Our alleluia will resound in joy on that day. For the glory of Easter is the glory of the transfiguration fulfilled. The triumphant Lord rises from the dead. The triumphant Lord is the first fruits of those who have died. The victorious Lord offers us the victory. For while we have not physically been with him on the mountain this day, we shall one day all literally see him in glory for we shall be like him and we shall see him as he is as St. John reminds us. As we sang before in Beautiful Savior:

Glory and honor, praise adoration
Now and forevermore be thine.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.