

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
St. Matthew 17:1-9

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here..."

Could you imagine being there? How glorious it must have been! Jesus takes you to be with Him up to the top of the mountain where a most radiant light shines from Him. To top it off, Moses and Elijah appear—only two of the greatest figures in Scripture! "This is cool," someone might say these days. Or, you could just say what Peter says, and mean the same thing: "It is good for us to be here."

Of course, there have been many more opportunities for Peter or another disciple or follower to say such a thing.

For one instance, we look at a situation in a small town in Galilee. Jesus, His disciples, and Mary were invited to a wedding. Now, weddings are normally great things. Ultimately, a man and a woman are brought together to spend the rest of their lives together, and then they throw a great party. Sure, there may be hiccups here and there along the way. The ring bearer or the flower girl get upset and run the wrong way, the bride may have woken up to a huge zit on the end of her nose, the groom may get so jittery that he messes up his lines, or something else may go wrong, but the end result is glorious and marvelous: two become one! And there's great food and drink to be had. Well, there was a hiccup at this wedding, too. Either someone didn't order enough wine or all the wine that was ordered never arrived—they ran out. But Jesus was there to save the day, and He turned water into the best wine anyone had ever had! (cf. John 2:1-11) "It is good for us to be here." "This is cool!"

We could also look at a time on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and His disciples had gotten into a boat as they were about to cross to the other side of the lake. Without warning, a furious storm came up. The storm was so violent, that the waves were crashing over the boat. The disciples were terrified, but through it all, Jesus was calmly sleeping. Out of fear for their lives, the disciples woke Jesus: "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" So He did, and rebuked the winds and the waves, "and there was great calm." So, they continued to the region of the Gergesenes. This was amazing to the disciples, for they asked one another, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (cf. Matthew 8:23-28) In other words, "It is good for us to be here." "This is cool!"

Or, there was another time. Imagine a mountain side by the Sea of Galilee. By this time, Jesus had performed many miracles—healing, casting out of demons, and the like. So, a large crowd of followers had formed—they, too, thought it was good to be here, where Jesus was. Seeing them, He asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" Well, they didn't have enough money to buy enough bread, for the number of men alone was 5000, and even the bread and fish that a small boy had wasn't enough—he only had five small barley loaves and two small fish. Yet after Jesus had taken the bread and the fish and given thanks, it was distributed to all the people, as much as they wanted! How glorious, from five small loaves of bread and two small fish, Jesus was able to feed over 5000 people, and there were 12 baskets full of leftovers! (cf. John 6:1-15) "It is good for us to be here." "This is cool!"

So, the stage was set for the Transfiguration. But, before we go there, we'll look at something that happened six days prior, recalling what was preached just last week. Jesus asks, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" Well, since He had done many marvelous things, but kept his divine nature

hidden for the most part and often told people not to reveal what had miraculously happened to them, the people thought Him some great prophet returned from the past. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks the disciples. Well, Simon Peter knew this: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And, as you recall from last week, it was shortly after this that Jesus began to inform His disciples about His Passion, suffering, and death. From that time on, Jesus would go from performer of many miracles and story teller to someone who must be sadistic, saying that he was going to suffer many things and eventually be killed. Peter pulls Jesus aside and says, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (cf. Matthew 16:13-23)

Peter's response to Jesus' prediction is understandable, if misguided. After all, Jesus had done many wondrous things, and it was marvelous in the eyes of all who beheld them. Even the people whom Jesus fed wanted to make Jesus king by force for having miraculously fed them. In Jesus, people had gotten a glimpse of God's glory, though He had, for the most part, kept it hidden. As a result, again, understandably, they want to keep Him around. "This Jesus can do some pretty amazing things for us in the here and now, no way we would want Him to die...we need to keep Him around."

So, on the mount of transfiguration, it was good for Peter and James and John to be there. "Hey Jesus, let's linger here for a while. You know, make the moment last! We'll build some shelters so You and Elijah and Moses can hang out with us for a good long time."

"You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

And honestly, things haven't gotten much better. People still prefer the glory to the Passion. People still do not have the things of God in mind. Yes, even people who would presume to be called Christian.

These supposedly Christian preachers will point you to the glory of Jesus, if they make mention of Jesus at all, but turn your attention away from the Passion of Christ. Televangelist after televangelist, and many preachers and missionaries in foreign lands will talk about getting something back, here and now, for being Christian, who spread the heresy that by being Christian, by making the choice to be a follower of Christ, Jesus will do for you everything you ask of Him.

There is this sad, Pentecostal idea pervading almost all of American Christianity, even Christianity the world over, as we heard a week ago Friday night, that God is your God to perform whatever miracles for you that you want. It's called the Prosperity Gospel. And through their evangelistic efforts, this heresy is spreading. You could say that Christianity around the world is becoming less Christian and more "American;" somehow, the Declaration of Independence has found its way into Christian teaching: "God is mine to fulfill my pursuit of happiness." And Christians around the world are latching on to this idea.

After all, it makes so much sense. Being a Christian should mean a better, more prosperous life, and who doesn't want more prosperity in life. "It is good for us to be here!" "This is cool!" And if it doesn't happen or isn't happening fast enough, well the simple explanation is that you don't believe hard enough, didn't pray long enough, or did something wrong.

This theology of glory leads to hopelessness. As I said, if the prosperity doesn't happen, then you aren't believing hard enough. Well, the questions must be asked, then, "How hard is hard enough? How long is long enough? Can you do anything right?" The longer that one remains un-prosperous, the more hopeless one gets. And if prosperity does happen, then the reason for that prosperity becomes the person who somehow must have believed hard enough, prayed long enough, or did something right in order to please God.

As frightful as that may be, it is also scary to know that this idea is spreading even into orthodox church bodies. The theology of glory rears its ugly head in Lutheranism, too, especially when the numbers start to get crunched. When there isn't enough money rolling in or when membership numbers decline, the head-scratching begins as the members wonder if they're doing something wrong or that maybe God is blessing someone or something else. Maybe the wrong things are being preached or taught. Maybe the wrong things are being believed or done.

It works the other way around, too. Perhaps the congregation is preaching and teaching heresy, all the while the numbers are rolling in—people in the pews and money in the plates. It can be seen as if God is blessing what they preach and teach with the numbers.

The theology of glory doesn't have to be so grand, however. How often have you thought that God must have been punishing you because things weren't going exactly as you wanted them to go? Or, on the flip side, how often did you think God was blessing you or granting your wish because you have done something good? As the Word of God declares, "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:45)

"Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

God is no genie. To all those who would seek the glory of Jesus before the passion of Christ, God the Father says, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" Hear Him because He has something to say: The Son of Man "**must** go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day." (Matthew 16:21, emphasis mine) This is sadistic foolishness to the theology of glory. It is the theology of the cross: God accomplishes His greatest good in the midst of suffering and when human reason is contradicted; it can only be received by faith and centers on the death of Christ for sinful man. Or, as Luther wrote: "When God makes alive He does it by killing, when He justifies He does it by making men guilty, when He exalts to heaven He does it by bringing down to hell." All of this He has done in His Son, Jesus the Christ.

And this is exactly what was confirmed by the Father's words: "his is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." You've heard those words before, a mere two weeks ago! The Father spoke them as Jesus came up out of the Jordan, having been baptized by John. In His baptism, Jesus was united with sinful man; He was united with you. In His baptism, He was designated as the bearer of your sin—He became your designated dier—so that He would take your sin with Him to the cross and there destroy it as He received the wrath of God due you. So, as Epiphany now ends, those words are read again, words that inexorably link the Baptism of Our Lord with the Transfiguration of Our Lord, a reminder that Jesus has come to bear your sin and be your Savior, to justify you by making Himself guilty. This is the will of the Father, and with His Son, He is pleased. "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

So, you know what. What Peter says is true. It is good for you to be here. This place is cool! For, as you have been marked with the sign of the cross, your sins atoned for by the passion, death, and resurrection of the Son of Man, and baptized into His name, the Father sees His Son when He looks at you, for in Holy Baptism, you have put on Christ. (cf. Galatians 3:27) He sees the merits of His Son given to you, and He is pleased. His will has been fulfilled, and you have been forgiven for all of your sins. That is the sign of orthodox church bodies—the Word is taught and preached in its purity—and that will never change as the Word of God never changes. It is what is believed, taught, and confessed in this place. And this is exactly as the Word of God declares:

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after

wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

Where is the theology of glory, which is the wisdom of this world? It is foolishness to God! We preach Christ crucified—the theology of the cross!

Therefore, what we preach—Christ crucified—is glorious! Christ has died that you may live! A miracle beyond all miracles. As St. Paul so wisely put it, “For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:10-11) This is the gift of mercy and grace that has been given to you in this place in Word and Sacrament. “It is good for you to be here.” “This is cool!” This is true because Jesus is here in all of His risen and ascended glory, though veiled from your eyes, to give of Himself to you. And because He has given and gives Himself to you, you are forgiven for all of your sins!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.