

Glory and Cross
Mark 9:2-9
February 11, 2018
The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Some big things happen on high mountains in the Bible. Noah's ark landed on Mt. Ararat, and there God promised never again to flood the entire earth. Abraham climbed Mount Moriah to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice before God provided a lamb. Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

The Transfiguration of our Lord is no exception: Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. Big things happen at this Transfiguration, and it's good for us to review them.

Jesus is transfigured, shining like lightning; in other words, He demonstrates that He's not just another man. He's fully human, yes—but He's also fully God. In the presence of Peter, James and John, Jesus gives them a brief glimpse of His heavenly, divine glory.

Furthermore, Moses and Elijah are there—but not to dispense advice. We know from Luke's account that they're talking about Jesus and His work. These greatest of prophets from the Old Testament are there to point again to Jesus. So Peter, James and John witness that Jesus is more than just another prophet: He's the Messiah whom the prophets foretold.

That's not all: God the Father overshadows them in a cloud and speaks: "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" In a glorious, thunderous way that complements Jesus' dazzling appearance, the Father declares that Jesus is His Son. Not only that, but Jesus is the Father's **beloved** Son. He's not an escapee from heaven, a renegade son on the run. He's God's beloved Son, sent by the Father to do the Father's will of salvation.

Peter, James and John get a glimpse of heavenly glory. They normally see Jesus as an ordinary, humble human being going about His work. But here, for a brief time, they see Him glorious—something like the glory of the Lord God sitting on the throne in heaven. It's short-lived, though; glory like this is the stuff of holy heaven, not sinful earth. God the Father recedes and the prophets disappear, leaving only the very ordinary-looking human Jesus standing in front of three bewildered disciples.

We know the story, and we know what it teaches. Now we must ask the question, "So what?" Why is Jesus transformed? Why then? And why in front of Peter, James and John? We don't know all of the reasons why; but we do know some. Jesus has already begun to tell the disciples that He is going to save the world not by glorious triumph, but by His death on the cross. His enemies have already begun to plot His death, and He is on His way to crucifixion. But before Peter, James and John see Him on the cross as the weakest and most condemned man on earth, they see Him transfigured and divine.

That's it for the heavenly glory. From here the disciples will see Jesus rejected, arrested, tried and crucified, with no glory to be seen. They'll see Him risen from the dead, and they'll watch

Him ascend into heaven—but no more dazzling white that the Scriptures record. After He’s ascended, they’ll go and proclaim the Gospel. The Church will grow as disciples are baptized and instructed—just as it does today. In the meantime, the disciples will face setback, suffering and even death themselves. Life on sinful earth will be like it always is: no heavenly glory, but labor and trouble. And hope.

Why hope? Because of what the Father said at the Transfiguration: “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him.” Hear Him. Long after the glory is disappeared, the disciples will still have Jesus’ Word, His Law and Gospel—His faith-giving, enlivening Word. Even though they won’t see more glory in this world, they have God’s Word that heaven is theirs. They have God’s Word that they’ll see His glory again.

So it was for Peter, James and John. Well and good. But once again we must ask, “So what?” So what does this mean for you? As we consider some applications, we do well to remember: the disciples had the joy of witnessing Jesus’ glory at the Transfiguration before proclaiming it. You weren’t on the mountain that day, and you don’t get to see Jesus’ dazzling glory on this side of heaven unless He returns soon. But you have something better: you have the Word. Although you haven’t seen the Transfiguration with your eyes, you’ve heard the Transfiguration with your ears. To put it in the language of the text, you don’t see God’s beloved Son, but you hear Him.

There are two basic ways to run theology—either a theology of glory or a theology of the cross. If you’re a theologian of glory, you go by what you see. You go by what you feel. You look for God in glorious things on earth— beautiful sunsets, good health and exciting experiences. Worship, to a theologian of glory, is about excitement and motivation.

If you’re a theologian of the cross, you operate differently. At the cross, the Lord won salvation even though it didn’t look glorious: His power and glory were hidden under suffering and death. You trust that Jesus’ death is your salvation not because it looked good, but because you hear in His Word that there Christ saved you. Hearing His Word, you don’t look for God to act in glorious ways; but like the cross, you look for God to work in ways where His glory is hidden.

For example: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion don’t look all that spectacular—but those are Sacraments in which God gives you forgiveness for all of your sins. It may not feel exciting—but God’s word promises you forgiveness, life and salvation. So as Christians in this world, as theologians of the cross, we don’t go with our eyes. Even at the Transfiguration, God the Father said, “Hear Him!” not “See Him.” In fact, often you will find that you must trust the Lord’s Word in spite of what you must see with your eyes.

Let me give you some examples: If you’re in junior high or high school, you’re in a unique part of life. It’s confusing time. You’re gaining more independence, but you’re not quite independent yet. It’s a time when you keep getting asked, “What are you going to do with your life?” and you may be asking yourself the same question. Where your parents may have sheltered you before, you’re exposed to all sorts of stuff right now. That includes temptations, including parties and sex, that people keep on saying are fun. When you get to college, every special interest group—cults included—will try to suck you in for all sorts of bizarre causes, and their friendship and commitment will seem attractive. A lot of this will seem exciting because you’ve never been confronted with it before; and that excitement will seem glorious. But you live by the Word, not

appearances. You don't live in glory, but under the cross. So you live by His Word. You follow His commands, even if others seem to have more fun. You don't measure God's approval by how people or activities make you feel. You know that **God** approves of you because you hear Him speak His Word of forgiveness. Rest assured: even if you don't know what you're going to do with your life, the Lord has plans for you—plans for a future and a hope.

A little older, and you're a college grad and a young adult. Glorious temptations abound again. Weekends present exciting opportunities to get away, and Word and Sacrament can get left in the dust again and again. Loneliness can lead to relationships that satisfy your felt needs, but destroy your faith. It can be tough being a faithful Christian as a young adult, but once again you go by the Lord's Word. The Lord declares that you're forgiven for Jesus' sake; and because that is true, He will work all things for your good. Parents worry about their kids. They want their little ones to get the best training and education and opportunities. They also know that the world is full of all sorts of dangers and false messages. And they're also horribly busy with all there is to do in this post-modern world. Against that backdrop, reading Bible stories, teaching toddlers to memorize the catechism and bringing kids to Sunday School seems so weak and powerless. But the Lord declares that He gives and strengthens faith by His Word, that those stories and doctrines strengthen the faith of your children. It doesn't look glorious, those family devotions while your kid is trying to play with the spoon that got left on the table—but that's where your kids can hear God's life-giving Word.

Grown-up kids worry about their parents. It's a real shock to realize that your parents, who have always been there, aren't going to always be there. Witnessing their health problems and deterioration brings home how awful are the wages of sin. Jarred by that grief, you can go by what you see, which may lead you to anger and despair. But you hear the Lord's Word; and though you still must grieve in this world, you remember Jesus' heavenly glory on that Mount of Transfiguration. You remember His many miracles of healing; and you look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

It goes without saying that, if you're the one with the health problems, the same is true. It's awful to witness the wages of sin within your own body, to measure failing stamina and health. You may be severely tempted to believe that physician assisted suicide is the answer – tempted to go by what you see, a loss of health and a supposed loss of dignity. But your final hope is not in your PSA counts or muscle strength or the test results that you see. Nor is it in seeking to escape the suffering by ending your own life. You hear. You listen to Jesus as he shouts to his friend, "Lazarus, come forth." You know that, on the Last Day, Jesus will say the same to you.

Whatever your age, you live in a sinful world. And while you want to see heavenly glory, there's not much heavenly glory to be seen in a sinful world. There's worldly glory, and plenty of that to distract you and lead you away from the faith. The Lord provides many days of happiness in this world, but there are other days when you've just got to grit your teeth, say "I am baptized!" and endure. And frankly, there will be times each day, or days and days, when you fail to live under the cross— when you give into this temptation or that one, when you cling to false glories of the world rather than God's grace, when you fail to speak grace to your family, when you despair instead of rejoice. It will be no different as long as you're in this inglorious world. But repent—and rejoice that you are not forsaken. The glorious Son of God became flesh in this world to deliver you to heaven. You don't see His glory, but you hear His grace. For now, you

live by faith on earth, but you will see heaven: because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen