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**Weekend of Sunday, February 11, 2018**  
**The Transfiguration of Our Lord/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B**  
**Primary Text: Mark 1:21-28**  
**Sermon Title: “Glory Before Gory”**

**Theme**

*Mark’s gospel presents the transfiguration as a preview of what would become apparent to Jesus’ followers after he rose from the dead. Confused disciples are given a vision of God’s glory manifest in the beloved Son.*

**Text**

<sup>2</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

## Sermon

"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here ..." Those were the words uttered by Peter, of course.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus withdrew with his inner circle of disciples, Peter James and John, to a mountain. This is the scenario. Everybody, from Moses on, knows that mountains are places that one climbs to get close to God, to experience a theophany, a mystical experience of the holy. Moses had to go up on a mountain to get the Ten Commandments. And on this magical mountain of transfiguration, the veil between past, present and future, the curtain separating the human from the divine, was lifted and for a shining instant the disciples were given a dazzling vision of who Jesus really is. There was a voice from heaven. Moses and Elijah, two prophets long dead, stood there among them, beside Jesus. The appearance of Jesus was transfigured before them, and they fell on their knees in awe and worshiped. Peter blurted out, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." And then Mark added, "He did not know what to say", but he just had to say something anyway, didn't he?

If something like that has never happened to you, I hope that you wish it would. If something like that has ever happened to you, then you know what I am trying to talk about here. You know how our petty, moralistic religion pales in significance in such a glorious moment.

In my youth, I was a Boy Scout and loved the outdoors. I never went to Lutheran church camp for a week in the summer but my church had annual youth retreats at the LOMO camps which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was on one of those weekends at Camp Luther that I experienced my first theophany. There were no appearances, no glowing images of the Savior, no disembodied voice from heaven, but I was forever changed by a sense of God's abiding presence in my life.

Until that point all I knew about God was what I was taught in Sunday School. But on that cold winter evening sitting alone in prayer in the outdoor chapel, I had my own mystical experience of the Holy and as a result of that one single moment more than any other single moment in my life, I came to believe.

I've had similar experiences at least a few times since then. Most times it has occurred out in nature. For some reason, it is out in nature, removed from the cacophony of life, that I am able to hear the still small voice of God.

Am I stretching things too much to say that this kind of experience, out in nature is something akin to what happened to the disciples there with Jesus on the mountain top?

Is it an unfair supposition to think that maybe this sort of thing has happened to you? Or, if it has never happened to you, is it an unfair supposition to expect that you hope, in your deepest being, that one day this will happen to you?

What did I feel? I felt thrilled to be there – thankful, comforted. As a child of probably 12 or 13 very unsure about just about everything including the very existence of God, on that night – that one thing was settled for me. God was real, and alive, and he knew and loved me.

But I also remember being somewhat frightened by it. Earlier that night I had prayed that I could really know of God's presence in my life and to my utter shock and awe – it came! Had I been biblically literate enough I too might have uttered the words spoken by the disciple Peter, "Lord, it is good that I am here! Let me build us a dwelling and we can just stay here forever."

We get our word *worship* from the old Anglo-Saxon *worth-ship*. To worship means *to see and to respond to the true worth of something, to recognize and to adore the value of it*. It seems that we Christians understand the weight of that word. We tend to use it exclusively for religious observances and so we do not overuse it, but I can see how could.

Thus the psalmist writes of worshiping God "in the beauty of his holiness." (Psalm 96:9) God's holiness and righteousness are beautiful to behold. Beauty has a way of reaching out to us, seizing us, demanding our adoration.

N. T. Wright, the noted NT scholar writes,

"Our ordinary experiences of beauty are given to us to provide a clue to give us a starting point, a signpost, from which we move on to recognize, to glimpse, to be

overwhelmed by, to adore, and so to worship, not just the majesty, but the beauty of God himself."

(N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*)

Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain occurs in the middle of a rather humdrum narrative of events down in the valley. Down in the valley, Jesus had just delivered a sermon a week before. He followed that with the feeding of the 4000 but no one seemed to notice they had just been involved in a miracle.

From there he continued his teaching and preaching, there were also some signs and miracles, but also some more confrontations with those jealous of his growing popularity.

There was Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah, but as you recall, that moment of insight was tempered by Peter's attempt to upbraid Jesus when he mentioned his Passion. There were moments when it seemed people began to realize who Jesus was, but then those moment seems to always be followed by their own stumbling. Maybe that is how life is for us. Moments of clarity and moments of confusion.

But up on that mountain the spectacular broke into the normal, the extraordinary cracked open the ordinary. And for a shining moment, the disciples saw and believed. "Lord, it is *good* for us to be here!"

Here is a question for you. Are they given a glimpse of the supernatural, or is this really the natural, seen rightly? Is this event on the mountain truly ordinary, or is this the ordinary seen through the eyes of faith? Maybe *it would all* seem like a miracle if we just had eyes to see.

As a definition of faith, let us take the writing of the apostle Paul to the Hebrews. He wrote, "**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**" (Hebrews 11:1) Faith is the gift of being aware of what's really going on beneath the surface. Seeing may not be as important as simply being aware.

Maybe that is why you come to worship in the first place. You know how easy it is to become accustomed to the anesthetizing routine of life; how easy it is to have

your vision dulled by the reassuring ordinariness of the everyday. So you come into this gathering, into this high place of praise hoping that the veil will be pulled back, the curtain will be lifted and for a shining moment you will be able to see the world as it really is.

I've always said that music has a transcendent characteristic to it. It allows our emotions to soar to heights that we otherwise cannot achieve without it. Part of our worship here at Zion on Saturday is that we are ministered to by the Saturday Singers and Sunday at 11:00 AM worship we are ministered to by our choir. They are not here to entertain us, but to lead us in worship. But it has been my experience many times, that after hearing them sing there is an awkward moment of complete silence. We are so appreciative of the beauty of what we have experienced, that we don't know what to do.

Last night, just before the reading, Tom Gent, Michele Vargo and Carol Jesse sang "Holy Ground." Brilliant musical selection Joan, but as they sang, I became aware of exactly that – we are standing on Holy Ground. A couple of weeks ago Joan gave me a heads up on a piece the choir was going to sing that was unusual – beautiful in its uniqueness. So I was tuned in to listen – and it was beautiful. In both of those moments and in many others, there is this sense that we just witness something extraordinary. We want to do something. The experience is truly worthy of our standing and exploding into applause – but its church – and so we sit there and marinate in the afterglow – for a couple of moments.

Then maybe someone will start to applaud. And then another, and then another and then the whole assembly joins in. It is not that we are unsure that the applause is deserved. I think the delay is because we have not yet regained our senses – have not yet come down off the mountain. The true source of our gratitude is that we have witnessed the creation of beauty offered to an audience whose lives are not always beautiful. But in that moment, at least for me, I am once again reassured of God's abiding presence – theophany. That is worship at its best.

On the mountain, Jesus was transfigured, his garments were gleaming white, and a light shone from him brighter than the light of the sun. His disciples, who had walked dusty roads with him, fell to their knees, overwhelmed with wonder. Then there was a voice from heaven. And they worshiped. Any wonder why they tried to preserve the moment and just ... dwell there.

## **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Pray that someday, stumbling through this service, we might be granted such a moment of wonder.

Pray that the beauty of God might break through to us, might reach down to us.

Pray that that happens because it is in those moments when all doubt fades and faith swells.

Pray that Lord would take us up the mountain, light the fire, remove the veil, let there be light, make us shout, "Lord, it is good that we should be here!"

And since it is not normally up on the mountaintop where ministry needs to be done, these momentary mountaintop experiences are just what we need occasionally to energize us for the ministry opportunities that come next. And isn't that just like God to give us just what we need.

## **Prayer**

Mysterious, wonderful, uncontainable God, you come to us in all of your transforming glory, whether we want you or not. You reveal yourself to us, sometimes in the most unlikely places. You transfigure our humdrum, dull, everyday world into the kingdom of heaven. We do not walk away from encounters with you the same as we were before we met you. You warm our hearts and move our lips to praise you. Thank you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen