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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/26/2017, Transfiguration Sunday
Matthew 17:1-9
Desolation and Consolation

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is a story of hope. It reveals that things are not always what they seem, and that what we can see and what we experience day by day is perhaps only a shadow of the truth. Although our earthly reality is often full of trouble and turmoil, we may be comforted by our trust that God is on our side, he is beautiful and true, and he is and working things out for our good.

St. Paul writes about our present cloudy view of things:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face (1
Corinthians 13:12)

Now we see the world and our lives only from a human perspective, but one day we will see the amazing things that God has planned for us and has promised us. One day we will all see Jesus in his glory, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white.

The book of Revelation describes this divine reality in John's vision of the holy city Jerusalem:

³There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne
of God and of the Lamb shall be in [the holy city], and his
servants shall worship him; ⁴*they shall see his face...*
(Revelation 22:3-4, RSV)

And then the sight Peter, James, and John beheld on the Mount of Transfiguration will be a sight that all of God's people will see. We will see Christ's face shining like the sun. We shall see our beautiful Saviour.¹

The story of the Transfiguration is story of movement from desolation to consolation. For where were the disciples before the Transfiguration and where are they afterwards? Just a few days before the Transfiguration, the disciples were low in spirit. Jesus had told them about the cross looming ahead for him. So, the disciples had reason to be disheartened by that news.

¹ These opening paragraphs are from the fine sermon by my wife, Carol. She is preaching her sermon this morning up at United Lutheran Church, Wartburg, Mt. Vernon, NY.

But see them now! They are so stunned by the Transfiguration of the Lord that they hardly know what to say. St. Peter never got over it. We read his grateful recollection in this morning's Epistle Lesson:

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, *but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.*
(2 Peter 1:16, NRSV)

The story of the Transfiguration of our Lord is a story that could well encourage the disciples in full face of dark days ahead for Jesus and for them who love Jesus. And it is a story that could well encourage you and me too. I pray that it will.

There is a great line in Psalm 30 about weeping in the nighttime. It goes like this:

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5, RSV)

Christians can say Amen to this with full assurance. Why? Is it because we are recklessly optimistic? Is it that we suppose that just as the dawn comes following the dark night, so joy always follows weeping, as if it were a law of nature? No, we are not reckless in our optimism. We believe that joy comes with the morning because we believe in Jesus. We believe in the *pattern* of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. It is a pattern of sorrow followed by joy, of darkness followed by light, of Golgotha followed by Easter Sunday sunrise. We believe that if the Lord should be angry with us, his anger is but for a moment, but his favor is forever (also Psalm 30:5). We believe the night ends and gives way to light. We believe that seasons of sorrow give way to seasons of peace and spiritual refreshment. We believe in such seasons of peace because we believe that Jesus means to make it so. Simply glance at him on the holy Mount of Transfiguration and you will see that here is Someone who has the capacity to bring light to a dark world.

In the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the awestruck question of the disciples receives its definitive and most radiant answer. Their question arises in the story of Christ calming the raging sea. Afterwards, when the wind and the waves have leapt forward in obedience to Jesus and have become suddenly calm, the disciples look at one another and ask their question. The Bible puts the scene this way:

Then [Jesus] arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. ²⁷But the men marvelled,

saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him! (Matthew 8:26-27, KJV)

Experienced fishermen! They know that in the ordinary course of things, winds and waves do not suddenly become calm in the midst of a storm. But in Jesus, they have Someone who is not “in the ordinary course of things.” It wrings their question from them, “What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him!” Now, on the holy Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples receive their answer. What manner of man is this? Answer, he is the beloved Son of God. This man they love and follow, he is not just an ordinary man. He is also the beloved Son of our heavenly Father. He is radiant, for he is God. His face “shines like the sun,” and his garments become as “radiant as light.” Can you imagine such a thing? How could you help but look on with amazement, to see Someone whose face shines like the sun and his garments are as radiant as light? Who is this man whom even wind and waves obey? Answer, he is the Radiant One, he is the very Master of the Sea, Commander of the wind and the waves. What a potful of hope Jesus gives Peter, James, and John up on the Mount of Transfiguration! What an abundance of encouragement he gives them there as they prepare to come down the mountain and head toward Jerusalem and the cross.

The story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord reveals that God above is mindful of the hard seasons of life for us below and wants us to be encouraged as we press onwards through them. By the time of the Transfiguration, not all is well for the disciples. They have been through a whirlwind of experiences, and they have not all been good. They have been living through an intense combination of good times and bad times, and it begins to look that the bad times are gaining the upper hand.

There are growing indications of disaster. Already opposition is developing against Jesus. The Pharisees, for example, give the worst possible interpretation of the miracles of Jesus:

²²Then a blind and dumb demoniac was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw. ²³And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” ²⁴But when the Pharisees heard it they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” (Matthew 12:22-24, RSV)

And just recently, just a few verses before this morning’s story of our Lord’s Transfiguration, Jesus himself had warned the disciples of looming trouble:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the

elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, RSV)

Jesus had spoken these haunting words just a while ago – just six days before his Transfiguration.

And so it is that on the holy mount of Transfiguration, the three disciples, Peter, James, and John, carry with them an extraordinary mixture of experience: they have seen good times with Jesus, but also they have experienced troubling times, with the eminent class of Pharisees accusing Jesus of being devilish, and Jesus himself speaking of suffering and death.

Now, on the mount of Transfiguration, suddenly every thing changes, for the good. In a flash, the disciples are given hope. They move from talk of suffering and death to a radiant vision of their Master as God. They move from desolation to consolation. They are permitted to see the glorious truth about Jesus. For a brief, shining moment, the veil is moved aside and they can see him as he is: the beloved Son of God.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, it as if Jesus is equipping his disciples for the dark days ahead. He reveals something of himself. He reveals his beauty and his radiance. For a moment, the disciples are permitted to see the truth of things. They are permitted to see that in following Jesus, they are entrusting themselves into the hands of Light. They are entrusting themselves into the hands of the Radiant One. His light will be *behind* them on the Mount of Transfiguration. His light will be *with* them in the “valley of the shadow of death.” And his light will *ahead* of them, on that distant shore, where they will see Jesus again as he really is: as our Beautiful Saviour.

You dear ones before me: You might now be plunged into sadness and darkness. Weeping might fill your nighttime someday. But know this: The night shall not last. The good dawn shall come. The beauty and radiance of Jesus shall be revealed. You will see it! You will see Jesus. Hang in there for now. Persevere in goodness, for now. Let your own light so shine before others, that you will bring glory to the name of Jesus and help make this world better.

We believe something good about Jesus. We have some vision of his beauty and his goodness. We believe that he is in charge of this old world and this is good, because the way of Jesus is the way of love. What we believe could well strengthen us and equip us to transfigure the world in a good direction. I believe that the people of our congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, have been doing that for 154 years now. We have been transfiguring Yorkville, encouraging it along toward the light. We have been transfiguring New York City, pushing our town along toward light. We have been transfiguring our various work places, with abiding courtesy and gentleness and integrity which reflect the very beauty of Jesus Christ himself.

Let such goodness continue. Let our lives bring some light into the city. Let our faith in Jesus overflow into good will toward a world Jesus loves. Let us endure any seasons of trouble, even any nights of weeping, knowing that Jesus will be glad for our good deeds and use them to help bring joy in the morning. Let us lend our strength to the good fight of faith in the name of the Radiant One, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.