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

Our Gospel story for this Sunday is the majestic story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. It is a dear story to us here at Immanuel Lutheran Church because our congregation was established on Transfiguration Sunday back in 1863, during the Civil War. Our painting of the Transfiguration above our reredos pays tribute to our founding Sunday and to the Transfiguration of our Lord.

So, today is about our Beautiful Savior, Jesus Christ. We are permitted to catch something of his beauty up there on the holy mountain.

But judging by today’s Epistle Reading, the Apostle Paul believes that the beauty of Jesus Christ splashes over onto us too. You and I might not look all that handsome or beautiful in the eyes of others, but in heaven’s eyes, we seem to be radiant. And we grow more and more radiant the longer we live with Christ and become like him.

We come, then, to my sermon text. It is about these things. In Second Corinthians Chapter Three, St. Paul writes this:

18 And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18, NRSV)

First off, I ask that we not be intimidated by the Apostle's words about seeing the glory of God “with unveiled faces.” He is talking about faith. He is talking about your faith in Jesus Christ. He does so by referring to the wonderful story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. Moses had been on top of that mountain for forty days and forty nights, conversing with the LORD. Such an encounter with our holy God left a visual impact upon the face of Moses. His face shone. The people were stunned and frightened by his radiance. The Bible puts the matter this way:

29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tables of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. (Exodus 34:29-30, RSV)
That is why Moses put the veil on his face. He did it in mercy upon the people, for he could see that the people were frightened of his radiance.

Now, St. Paul is saying to us that we also look upon the glory of the Lord. We do that with the eyes of our faith whenever we are thinking of Jesus and trying to live for him. But, the apostle points out, we look upon the glory of the Lord “with unveiled faces.” That is, when we think of our Savior Jesus Christ, we do not need to shield our faces from his radiance. Why? Because when we think of Jesus, we think of his cross, and what is radiant about a cross? What we know of Jesus in the gospel stories is that he is walking, with steady step, toward his cross. All along his way he is reaching out to people with his wonderful love that will reached its pinnacle on the cross.

At first glance, there is little glory or radiance in the story of a man on his way to a cross. The steady walk of Jesus toward Calvary was a walk along dusty roads, through ordinary towns and villages, where he had some following but also growing opposition. Not much glory there. And not much glory on Calvary. Thorns and spikes and blood and agony... There is not much glory or radiance in such things.

But that is only at first glance. St. Paul would have us know that when we are meditating upon Jesus and upon his way of the cross, we are in fact thinking of Someone most beautiful, as heaven measures things. Furthermore, the Apostle would have us know that we ourselves are being transformed in a beautiful direction as we follow this Jesus of the cross, this Jesus of kindness and goodness. We are being transformed, “from one degree of glory to another,” as the Apostle puts it, as we grow in love and loyalty to Jesus.

Here at Immanuel on this festival of the Transfiguration of our Lord we sing two hymns today. One concerns Jesus, the other concerns us. The great hymn concerning Jesus is a favorite hymn here at Immanuel, “Beautiful Savior” (LBW 518). Sometimes we sing the third verse a cappella, and then join in with organ and strong voices on the last verse. That is going to be our recessional hymn.

The other hymn, which we will sing during Holy Communion, is a hymn that speaks of us. It is a hymn of Christian hope called “Who Is This Host Arrayed in White” (LBW 314). I love this hymn because it takes a second, more careful look, at ordinary Christians like you and me. The second verse includes these words:

On earth their work was not thought wise,  
But sees them now in heaven’s eyes;  
Before God’s throne of precious stone  
They sing their victory cries.

On earth they wept through bitter years;  
Now God has wiped away their tears,
Transformed their strife to heavenly life,
And freed them from their fears.

Here on earth, in the years granted to us, a faithful Christian life often looks rather humble. The world sometimes recognizes it as being a good life, but also notes that it is rather lowly. It is a life that involves much doing and much refraining to do. Let us speaking of the refraining first: Life in Christ often leads us, and should lead us, to control our tongue and to withhold bitter and hurtful words. In general, life in Christ should lead us to step back from sin and vice. We should withhold ourselves, for example, from drunkenness — not necessarily from drink, but yes, from drunkenness. We should step back from dens of iniquity and pornography. Certainly we should step back from adultery! Life in Christ should find us in retreat, walking away from both fierce wrath and slothful laziness. We turn and walk away from dishonest, underhanded, and unfair ways of making money. We should flee from those deeds and practices that are unworthy of Jesus Christ. Not much glory for us in these disciplines. There is not a whole lot of radiance connected with withholding ourselves from sin.

Likewise, the positive good things that Christians do are often unremarkable. They include the good things that any human being should do. Because a Christian is mindful of Jesus Christ, we should discipline ourselves to do our duties, to love and care for the people God has placed in our life, to be charitable to the poor, to pay our taxes fair and square, to pray for our city and for our land, to encourage and guide others as we are able, to care about justice and to vote, trying to increase peace and justice on earth.

All together, there is a host of things Christians should do which are not particularly remarkable or glorious. But if we get up in the morning and we dedicate the day to Jesus and then try to live that day in a way that we think Jesus desires, then we are exercising a kind of holy priesthood. This is what Martin Luther meant by the “priesthood of all believers.” He believed that when the blacksmith, for example, forged good horse shoes in the name of Jesus, that day’s work constituted a holy offering to God. No priest, bishop, or pope could do more holy work than that blacksmith.

Still, to the world looking on, the ordinary life of the Christian is often unremarkable. It does not shine in the eyes of many people on earth.

Ahh, but on Transfiguration Sunday we are invited to look at the ordinary life of the Christian from heaven’s eyes. As the angels, archangels, and saints of heaven regard our daily walk with Jesus, they see that we are being transformed, as our Bible texts puts it...

...transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18, NRSV)
And so it is that we might not even notice it about ourselves, but our daily walk with Jesus does and should transform us into the image of Jesus — the same image as our Lord.

Every decade or so, it seems right to me that I should repeat a particular line from a sermon by my predecessor here at Immanuel Lutheran Church — dear Pastor Raymond Schulze. The line I have in mind comes from Pastor Schulze’s sermon at the funeral of Church Deacon Thomas Dorris. There might be a few of you here at Immanuel who remember Deacon Dorris. He was a man whose sanctity was evident to many. In his sermon at the funeral, Pastor Schulze said something like this:

I mean no impiety by this image, but I cannot help but think that on the great and final judgment day, Jesus will see Deacon Thomas Dorris approaching Christ’s throne, and Jesus will be rather startled. Jesus will think to himself, “What is this I see? It looks as if I see myself approaching the throne, approaching me!”

And so it should be for each of us. As we live in Christ and grow in his spirit, we should be transformed into the very image of Jesus “from one degree of glory to another.” We should come to resemble Jesus more and more. I doubt that we will ever arrive in this life to such perfection, to such a blessed confusion, in which it is hard to tell Jesus and us apart. But let us try!

Let us hurl our thoughts into heaven. One day the ordinary and often unremarkable life we live will come to an end and we will be off for heaven. There we will see our beautiful Savior face-to-face, and there we will see in one another a kind of beauty, glory, and radiance that is the true nature of those who are trying to follow Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.