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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Transfiguration Sunday, February 7, 2024
Mark 9:2-9
We Too Shall Be Transfigured

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

Notice the location of our Transfiguration story. It takes place on a mountain. And so we read this:

And after six days 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... (Mark 9:2, RSV)

Some people are mountain people. Pastor Carol is such a one. She was born and was raised in Denver, Colorado for the first ten years of her life. She has never really gotten the Rocky Mountains out of her blood. Not me. I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, which is as flat as a pancake. That's how I like it. Being flat seems rational and orderly to me. But Carol loves the various ups-and-downs of mountains. If we are driving west, her eyes slip right on by the calm and orderly farmlands. She is looking at the horizon... searching for the mountains. So, some people are mountain people.

It turns out that the three heroes in today's Transfiguration story are also mountain people. Our Lord's great opening sermon, for example, is set on a mountain — the Sermon on the Mount. Again, from time to time, Jesus would go "up on the mountain by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:28). And then we have today's story of the Transfiguration. Jesus is in charge. He leads Peter, James, and John "up a high mountain apart by themselves." There is something about Jesus that loves a mountain.

It is the same with Moses and Elijah.

In a recent book on the Transfiguration, theologian Sarah Hinlicky Wilson notes that a common interpretation of Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration story is that Moses represents God's holy law and Elijah represents the prophets.¹ Sarah, however, points out that, though it is right to think of Moses as Israel's great Lawgiver, he himself thought that he was a prophet. Just a couple Sundays ago, we read about that. When Moses was near the end of his life and would not be able to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, he comforted the people by saying that the LORD would

¹ *Seven Ways of Looking at the Transfiguration*, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (Thornbush Press, 2024).

raise up for them another prophet like him. And so we read the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deuteronomy 18:15, RSV)

As for Elijah, he hardly seems like a prophet at all. He is more a man of action. He is the one who mocked and then killed the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). And there is no book in the Bible called "The Book of the Prophet Elijah." We have books by Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others, but not one by Elijah.

So, the common idea that Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets is a bit off kilter.

What does unite them is that they are both mountain people. They are both people who climbed up a mountain all the way till they drew very near to Almighty God himself.

Think first of Moses. He receives the Ten Commandments from the LORD on top of Mount Sinai. Most of the people remain down at the foot of the mountain. Moses brings seventy of the elders of Israel partway up the mountain, but then the LORD instructs him to leave them behind and to come on up the rest of the way by himself. It is a pretty dramatic scene. We read of it in Exodus 24:

¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (Exodus 24:15-18, RSV)

It was on top of that mountain that Moses conversed with God. When the LORD had told Moses all his words, then He gave Moses the Ten Commandments. They were written with God's finger on tables of stone (Exodus 31:18).

So, that is Moses. He went up the mountain and beheld the glory of the LORD in a cloud atop the mountain.

Elijah too climbed a mountain. We read of this in the famous passage about the "still, small voice."

¹¹And [the LORD] said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³And when Eli'jah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle... (1 Kings 19:11-12, RSV)

This is what makes it fitting that Moses and Elijah should be with Jesus on the Holy Mount of Transfiguration: They climbed a mountain and beheld God.

But they beheld God in the form of a cloud and a still, small voice. Now, on the holy mountain, they behold God more clearly. They behold Jesus, but transfigured before them. They behold Jesus as you and I shall behold him someday, when he returns to this old earth of ours. St. Mark says that his garments are glistening white, "intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3). St. Matthew adds that the face of Jesus shone:

²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. (Matthew 17:2, RSV)

That is going to be an awesome sight. I bet we will not be inclined to argue with Jesus then or to doubt his words to even the slightest degree.

I have two things to say about the Transfiguration of our Lord. I hope that they will help us in our earthly life, in the years that remain to us. First, the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord gives consolation to the disciples as they enter a time of desolation, when Jesus will be betrayed and crucified. And second, the story of the Transfiguration shows how you and I look in heaven's eyes as we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

First, about consolation and desolation. These are the good words of Pastor Carol as she thinks about the Transfiguration of our Lord. The idea is this: The disciples are about to enter a hard time of life. Their love for Jesus means that they will grieve as they watch what is happening to him. Jesus has already alerted them that he is headed to Jerusalem where he will suffer. In the chapter just before the Transfiguration story, Jesus speaks of his coming death. It is a story in which Peter does not do well. And so we read this:

³¹And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and

the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." (Mark 8:31-33, RSV)

This same Peter is now taken by Jesus up the Mount of Transfiguration. Before the Transfiguration, Peter was appalled to hear Jesus speak of his coming death. And on the other side of the Transfiguration, Peter will grieve as he watches the death of Jesus unfold. But now, for one, brief shining moment, Peter, along with James and John, is permitted to see the truth about Jesus. The three disciples see that in Jesus, they are not dealing with just another man. Instead, they are dealing with the triumphant One — the One who will conquer death and come again someday as humanity's great Lord, Judge, and Saviour.

Likewise with us. For all we know, you and I might be entering into a season of desolation. Things might seem to be falling apart for us. But the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord is recorded in sacred scripture for our encouragement. We get to stand beside Peter, James, and John and, in a fashion, behold with them the glistening garments, the shining face of Jesus, and the voice of God the Father declaring that Jesus is his beloved Son. No matter what else might be happening in our lives, we cannot be deprived of this: We belong to Jesus. We gave ourselves to him and he to us when we were baptized. And so any season of desolation is going to give way in the end. Desolation is going to give way to Jesus Christ and to his kingdom.

My second theme is that the story of the Transfiguration permits us to see how we look in heaven's eyes as we take up our cross and follow Jesus. This theme rather reverses our usual direction of sight when it comes to the Transfiguration. Most times, when we think of that story, we believe that we are getting a peek into heaven. We are getting to see how Jesus really is. But now I want to reverse the direction of sight and to say that this is how we look in heaven's eyes in our daily walk with Jesus. We look radiant! In the eyes of everyone else, we might look haggard, worn out, and battered, stumbling along. But in heaven's eyes, we look great, with a greatness that will be revealed to the whole universe someday.

That is why I so often choose today's sermon hymn for the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord. "Who is this host arrayed in white?" Answer, you and me, someday! Listen again to the second verse of that hymn and apply it to yourself:

On earth their work was not thought wise,
but see them now in heaven's eyes;

before God's throne of precious stone
they shout their vict'ry cries.
On earth they wept through bitter years;
now God has wiped away their tears,
transformed their strife to heav'nly life,
and freed them from their fears.
("Who Is This Host Arrayed in White?" LBW 314)

"On earth their work was not thought wise, but see them now in heaven's eyes." This joyous verse applies not only to the famous saints of the world, but also to the quiet, almost unknown saints who work as dressmakers or blacksmiths or plumbers and who keep the faith. Yes, and it applies to our elected congregational leaders we mean to install in office later in this liturgy. And it applies to all the volunteers who help keep our church afloat, including our greeters, our Altar Guild, our crucifers, our lectors, and so many other quiet Christians in this world. "Nothing special," the world might say. But see them now in heaven's eyes!

That is the uplifting thing about Transfiguration Sunday. It gives us a glimpse of our Beautiful Savior, but also it gives us a glimpse of ourselves as we try, day by day, to walk with Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.