

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Exodus 24:12, 15-18; Matthew 17:1-9

See the Lord's Glory

When studying the Bible, it's always important to look at where a lesson falls in a particular book. There is an ebb and flow to the Scriptures, a rhythm and rhyme. Without context we're lost, we can't keep step with the Spirit's song. This is especially true with regard to our first lesson today.

At the beginning of chapter 24, just before our lesson, God invited Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel up Mount Sinai to worship at a distance. Only Moses was to approach the LORD. The next morning, Moses set up an altar at the foot of the mountain and they sacrificed young bulls. Moses took half of the blood and sprinkled it on the altar. Then he read the Book of the Covenant to the people. When they pledged themselves to it unconditionally, which is the only way to pledge oneself to the Word of God, he took the rest of the blood and sprinkled it on them. The covenant was marked with the blood of sacrifice.

Imagine if I tried doing that today. Imagine if I tossed a few bowls of blood on you. I'm guessing there might be some blood-spattered frowns and a few dry-cleaning bills on my desk. This is a troubling picture, but God includes it for a reason, and I have to say that I hope you leave covered in blood nonetheless.

After this incident, Moses and those mentioned earlier saw God and ate and drank with Him. God's covenant was marked with a meal, but only those covered by the blood of the sacrifice could take part.

And that is where our lesson picks up. Moses heads up Mount Sinai alone. The glory of the LORD settles around the mountain for six days, the same number of days as creation. On the seventh day, the Sabbath, God calls to Moses from within the cloud. The Israelites at the base of the mountain are terrified. What Moses sees as the glory of the LORD appears to them to be a consuming fire. Moses does not run from the voice, however. He follows it right into the cloud. And he stays there for forty days and forty nights.

I've included in your worship folders today a copy of a woodcut done by Lucas Cranach, the man who put Luther's sermons into pictures. There are two scenes. The first is the sinner before God's glory according to the law, the second according to the gospel. Take a minute and look at it. Of which scene would you prefer to be a part? Why?

The Israelites at the foot of the mountain were in the first scene. They knew God according to the law alone, or at least that is how they saw Him in this lesson. The glory of the LORD terrified them. They did not yet understand the power of the blood with which they had been sprinkled. They did not understand that they were to stand before God, not on their own merits, but on the merits of the sacrifice. They were scared for Moses and, more importantly, for themselves.

And when we stand before God according to the law, we can respond no differently. The law drives us to hell, death heckling and chasing us all the while, the sulfur of the eternal fires filling our nostrils, the horror of damnation filling our hearts. "Do this," the law

says, and we haven't done it. "Don't do this," the law says, and we've done it. And the law leaves no doubt about the punishment. "*The wages of sin is death.*" At the sight of God's glory, the law sends the sinner racing, not toward His voice, but away from it, not up the mountain of salvation, but into the pits of hell.

Moses, however, was on the mountain forty days and nights. He approached the LORD with repentance, which is sorrow over sin and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. He understood the blood. He understood the meal. God had made a covenant with Him, a promise of mercy and deliverance, and Moses trusted God to keep it, even though Moses had not kept the law. And so he walked toward the glory, he followed the voice, he found a home on the mountain of salvation.

Transfiguration is the starting pistol for Lent and a sneak preview of Easter. The One glorified in the Holy Gospel is the One who will be vilified, humiliated, and crucified in Lent, but also the One who will be raised and glorified again on Easter. The One who descends into Hell is the same one who is seated at the right hand of God the Father. The One who accepts death is the One who gives life.

Many old churches in Germany are filled with skulls. "*Memento moris,*" "remember death," they warn. Even the most handsome leave behind a frightening skull. Even the prettiest hair turns terrifying on a rotting corpse. Death hovers over us all, and, if we dare to look at it, we can't help but feel its bony fingers tapping our shoulders, sense it like a shadow haunting us everywhere we go. Many old churches are filled with skulls, but there is one skull you'll never find in them, and that is Christ's.

When we were in Munich there was a huge group of tourists in the church where King Ludwig is buried in a stunningly impressive grave. They were asking each other whose grave it was. Obviously, they couldn't read the Latin inscriptions—who ever said it was a dead language. I joked that we should tell them it was Jesus' grave. That would impress them.

Later, I thought about what a great opportunity that could have been. Over and over again these tourists, who were clearly not Christians, had seen pictures of Jesus' dying—very powerful depictions—and what an opportunity it would have been to explain that though He died, He still lives, that His grave is stunningly impressive, not because of its adornment, but because it is empty. If only I were less of a smart aleck and more of an evangelist!

Look at the second picture in that woodcut again. Jesus is on the cross, and His Blood, the Blood of the sacrifice, flows down upon the condemned sinner. He is the Lamb of God, as we see at the foot of His cross. His Blood is the very Blood we drink in the Meal of the Covenant, the seal of our forgiveness, the foretaste of future glory. The sinner is not heckled and chased by death. No, the sinner lifts His eyes to see death defeated, death's mouth shut by the open wounds of our crucified God. Christ walks out of His tomb and treads death underfoot, together with the devil, His arms open to receive the sinner through grace, His glory an invitation and not a threat.

There are two ways to approach Christ: through the law or through the gospel. The one points you to what you have done, the other points you to what Christ has done. The one sends you running from the mountain of salvation, the other calls you up it. The one fills

your heart with terror, the other calms it with God's own loving voice. The one turns flesh to bones, the other puts flesh back on them.

Today is the Transfiguration. As you see the Lord's glory, *memento moris*, remember death. But don't merely remember your own death. Remember His, and in doing so, remember life, new life, because that is what awaits those who walk with Him who sets His face on Jerusalem and His suffering and death, those who know what His Blood means, those who eat with Him the Meal of the Covenant, who bury their sins in His grave and see His glory even in His cross. Transfiguration is the starting pistol. Stay in the race. Amen.