

Let us pray,

Father, we have gathered again today at your invitation and by your grace, to worship and to fellowship with you. We have heard your word this morning, many of us through ears that are yet deafened by the noise of this world and all that would seek our attention. And so, in your great mercy, I ask that you would open our ears to the voice of your spirit and prepare our hearts and minds to receive all that you would teach us and all the ways you would change us as we meditate further on your word, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today is transfiguration Sunday.

- It's the last Sunday after Epiphany and the first before Lent

A day when we traditionally celebrate the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, the account of which we just heard from the Gospel of Mark

And if someone were to ask what the Transfiguration is all about, in addition to reading from Mark, or Matthew, or Luke, we might tell them that

- Much of the church has celebrated transfiguration in August over the years

Starting in the fourth century the Eastern Church celebrated it as a movable feast

The West picked up on it by the ninth century, but even then it was not on a fixed date until after the defeat of the Turks at Belgrade on August 6, 1457 when it became a celebration of that victory as well

And in fact our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters still celebrate it on August 6

- And although the celebration of Transfiguration in August obviously didn't really begin for THIS reason,

some also associate it with the Jewish festival of booths (or feast of tabernacles), a harvest of renewal of covenant and thanksgiving to God who tabernacles, or dwells, among us

- For much of the Protestant world, though, Transfiguration has become a transitional remembrance, the last Sunday after Epiphany, as we move into Lent

A friend recently reminded me that some of the words we use to describe certain biblical ideas and events of the church year are very “churchy” words

- Even if we have some idea what they mean, they often seem rather disconnected from the basic day to day process of being Christian
- So with a few churchy words, like Epiphany, Lent, Booths, Tabernacles, and Covenant, and an impressive fact or two from Church history

*I’ve just summarized **most** of what you need to know about another churchy word: transfiguration*

And if that’s really true, I’d expect that

- even as many of us churchy folk will dutifully nod our heads and settle in to hear a few more edifying details
- most of us, if we’re honest, might begin ask a more interesting and nagging question:

So what?

WELL, I might say indignantly, so what?!

- Why Jesus went up on the mountain and was changed

He glowed

He talked to Moses and Elijah

God the Father spoke

- That’s what transfiguration is all about!

And again we might nod our heads

and if we were Baptists or Nazarenes, a few of the more pious among us might even say Amen out loud

- Well it squares with what we know of Jesus

he was the Son of God, of course—we believe that

so the Son of God goes up on the mountain, glows all over, talks to a couple of dead men, and God calls him his son.

Why that happened when it did, we may not be entirely sure, but it’s a great story and must have been quite a site!

- Great—I’m warm and fuzzy all over, let’s sing a hymn—**SO WHAT.**

The more honest, or maybe just the more cynical, among us

- Might begin to think to ourselves

That life's a bit overwhelming right now to be talking about transfiguration, Lent, or anything else on the Christian calendar

Perhaps we should focus on something a little closer to home

And if most of us are completely honest with ourselves,

- The fact that Jesus glowed on the mountain means less to us than the fact that he died on the tree
- To tell the truth, when we get right down to it

most of us know what Jesus should mean to us, and transfiguration, though it has the makings of a nice story, seems to have little to do with it

And sure, we love to come to church each Sunday to remember all of the great things he did and to use the churchy words

But we struggle with making sense of what all of that means

- when we have to keep up with life
- when we see more of the effects of sin in the world than we do of Christ
- and when Jesus seems a lot more distant and less real than time pressures, bills, irritating people, and working hard to get ahead.

So if we're really honest, we still say

so what?

Even if we look at it in context, from the perspective of Jesus and the disciples

- Even with all that was going on when Jesus went up the mountain

what difference did the transfiguration really make?

- Jesus still had to die on the cross

He still had to face the disgrace of betrayal, arrest, and torture

He still had to go back down the mountain to face the combative Pharisees and the demands of the crowds

- And his disciples still had to go through all of that with him

When all this happened, their heads were reeling from what they just heard was coming

Jesus had just told them that his road led to the cross, that he was going to have to die

And he pulled them into all of this by telling them that whoever wanted to be his disciple would have to take up his cross and follow him

- They still had to stand by or deny him

They still had to weep when the cock crowed or at the foot of the cross

They still had to hide in the upper room, face persecution and imprisonment, and die their own ignominious deaths

In fact, the account of the transfiguration seems to have occurred at roughly the same time that John tells us that Jesus was saying some VERY difficult things

Things that created quite a bit of debate about who he is

and that caused many to fall away

- After many miracles and confrontations with the Pharisees when Jesus seemed to have the upper hand

things were now becoming a bit more difficult

- and even through the disciples may have had quite a bit of confidence in Jesus
they were seeing more anger and hearing more venom in the taunts of the authorities and Jesus was suddenly talking about death and crosses

(look back just a little ways in Mark and you'll find Jesus predicting his death and talking about his disciples taking up their crosses to follow him)

- By this time **Jesus** is still with the disciples, but **Christ**, the messiah Peter confessed him to be, that long awaited deliverer, was beginning to seem very far away

So when they saw Jesus glow a little and heard God speak, they must have wondered what was going on, why this was important and what it meant

And Peter handled it in typical Peter fashion

- Great, let's put up a few tents

what you're really saying, Peter, is that you're not sure what to do with all of this either.

So what!

[Softly, as if a light bulb just came on]

So...WHAT?

So the disciples, overwhelmed and confused, go with Jesus up the mountain

- away for a few moments from the pressures below
- away for some stolen moments to clear their heads

those of us who have been up our own mountain know what this is like

And Jesus, knowing what's ahead

- and already full of grief over what he must do and why
- and maybe even a bit weary and fearful

takes his closest companions up the mountain for a little solitude and reflection

And while they're there, in the midst of their fear and fatigue

- When they all needed something to hold onto

When they probably were looking for something to make sense in their struggle

Even before they knew everything that struggle would involve

- For a moment, they glimpse the glory of God in Jesus

[PAUSE]

There was much going on on that mountain that was important, of course

- It was all there,

Moses and Elijah, glowing faces, brilliant white garments, the cloud and the voice of God

- But I'm sure there was much about what happened that they probably didn't understand until afterward, maybe until long after the resurrection

The best that Peter could think to do was try and capture the moment by throwing up a few tents

Later, though, when they discussed it together and shared it with those who would eventually write the account into the gospels

- I'm sure they realized a bit more about what was going on and picked up on some of the details that give us the best clues

Jesus shone with the glory of his future, and ours

- He spoke with Moses and Elijah, the great lawgiver and the prophet of prophets

what he was doing was continuous with the fullness of God's plan from the beginning

Jesus was the next and greatest phase of God's gracious effort to restore creation and bring his people into fellowship with himself

All of the seeming chaos was part of the plan

- The cloud was there

Just as it was when it led the Israelites

Just as it covered the mountain when Moses spoke to God and came back white and glowing long before

Just as it was in the whirlwind that took Elijah into heaven

- And from the cloud, the mysterious presence of God, the Father's voice commands, and reassures

"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Jesus is who you thought he was, and more

- The dark things Jesus is predicting
- The gathering conflict and the confusion

Cannot hide the glory of God in Christ nor thwart the fulfillment of what he's been planning from the beginning of time

They may not have fully grasped all of the implications in that moment but for the disciples, and really, even for Christ, transfiguration meant

- **clarification** (of just who it was they were following)

this IS my son, the Father reaffirmed

Christ shone and fellowshiped with the patriarch and the prophet—no mistaking that he was no mere Rabbi

nor was he Moses or Elijah returned—they were there with him, but he was different

- In their confusion, the transfiguration meant **comfort** (the comfort of knowing that God was in control)

the law, the prophets, all that has been and all that will be is fulfilled in these moments, in Jesus, this man they have been following and in whom they have trusted

Even though they've been both awed and puzzled, now they have the comfort of knowing that their faith and trust are not misplaced

- And when they needed it most, the transfiguration was **confirmation** (that all of this talk of death really did have something to do with the Messiah and deliverance)

They had known who Jesus was (Peter admitted as much not long before)

*But then they come to find out that this messiah they were following was going to die—this was **not** the plan they expected!*

But now it was confirmed—Jesus, not those who plotted against him, is the keeper and fulfiller of God's plan for the salvation of his people

In Luke's account, we're told that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah "...spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."

There was a plan, and it was progressing as it should

The disciples were not just onlookers, though, in need of this sign to confirm and comfort.

- For these few, who would later lead the way in spreading the gospel and building the kingdom, the transfiguration was a **commission** (though confused and feeling **way in over their heads**, the disciples were part of the plan)

"Listen to him," God the Father said

When Jesus said "Take up your cross and follow me," and "lose your life for the sake of me and the gospel," he was enlisting those who would really go the distance—those who would take their place at his side and give everything to see his kingdom come

And the Father himself let them know—this was indeed their calling

Did they grasp all of this that night on the mountain?

- Probably not
- But in that simple, but glorious, moment of mystery

that fleeting glimpse into the glory and plan of God

I'm sure the disciples were given something they could hold onto as they turned their attention to the struggle below and followed Jesus on his path to the cross

In that moment

- They were given something to remember and something to anticipate all at the same time
- And in the midst of the gathering darkness

they were reminded just who was in control

So what?

- **So the transfiguration may have made the difference between staying the course or falling away for them**
- "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve in John

It may well have been that evening on the mountain that helped confirm the response of Peter:

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

[PAUSE]

All through Epiphany we've been saying that God is with us!

- Just as Jesus walked with his disciples saying "God is with you," and "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."
- And we've been looking at the miracles and message of Jesus as evidence of the truth of the kingdom and presence of God.

But like his disciples,

- We may know that Jesus is with us, but we face much in life that would lead us to wonder how close our Lord and Savior really is
- And even though we might understand the big picture well enough,
- even when we when we can, like Peter, admit with some measure of confidence that Jesus is Lord

we still have a difficult time facing our daily struggles with joy

in fact, I suspect many of us have a difficult time facing our daily struggles...period.

During those days when we feel spent and wasted

which seem to come a little too often

...when we are hard pressed, perplexed, and confused

...when the darkness seems to veil the light of Christ

war and terrorism persists

the moral state of our world and our country crumbles

when servants of the Gospel, like Bishop Kwashi of Nigeria, are attacked, and his family tortured

...when our lives seem out of control

and we face financial pressures

workmates or neighbors who cause us trouble

temptations

physical ailments

or grief, fear, loneliness, and depression

...or when we fail

and we do things we're not at all proud of

or we cause pain in our families and hurt those we love

when guilt and despair seem more real and more present in our lives than Jesus

Christ's transfiguration says—God REALLY IS with us!!

- Even when his way leads through the valley of the shadow of death
through the uncertain times, through suffering for his sake
- Even when we who follow might yet fail him as Peter would

We can be sustained through the hope that this Christ we serve really is the Son of God, the glory of the Father

- that even the darkness cannot hide the light of his glory or obscure his presence forever
- and that the plan of God for the salvation of the world, **even for our own deliverance**
*has taken into account the darkness and the confusion and **will conquer it***
- We are invited to have hope in the transfigured Christ, even as the darkness gathers
"This is my Son, whom I love." God the Father said. "Listen to him!"

Many of us have encountered a moment of transfiguration

- an unexpected glimpse of the fullness of Jesus and his glory
- Perhaps
a moment in worship, at his table
a moment in the quiet of prayer or reading his word
a dream or a vision
maybe even a moment on a mountain, away from the struggle
***or maybe a moment in the deepest darkness** when his presence was revealed just as things seemed to be the most hopeless.*

Remember that moment, reflect on it again

- Remember when you were overcome by God's presence, reassured, caught up in a brief glimpse of the fullness of who he is and the magnitude of his love and his plan

[PAUSE]

That's what the transfiguration is all about

[PAUSE]

As we turn our attention to Lent and to the cross in the coming weeks

- to contemplation of the cost of being disciples
- to face the realities of sin and the need for repentance and discipline
- and even more so as we struggle to follow Christ each and every day
*and face the presence of sin in a fallen world, and in our lives
as we say that Christ is with us, but as he seems a little too far away*

This moment

- in which we have caught a glimpse of the glory of our Lord, the closeness of God, and the fullness of his plan and purpose
- this moment that we share with his disciples as read their story

This moment that we call “the transfiguration” can make the difference for us as it did for them

So what?

- So everything
*So God REALLY is with us—even when he seems so far
So God really is in control—even when life is overwhelming and confusing*
- **We really ARE loved by and are serving the holy one of God who holds time in his hands**
- And although the veil of sin and darkness seems impenetrable
*We are even changed ourselves by the light and glory of Christ
the light that shines in the darkness*

Paul knew what the transfiguration was all about

- he knew what it meant to struggle and suffer, even to the point of being overwhelmed,
- and he knew what it meant to remember and rely upon the glory of Christ when the darkness seemed to close in

And he knew what it meant to persevere and rejoice in the hope that glory, even when pressing on was most difficult.

And so he reminds us in our reading from 2 Corinthians for today,

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”

and he continues

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”

“Therefore we do not lose heart,” he says a little later. “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

So what?

- So we’ve caught a glimpse of God’s glory in Christ, of the eternal purpose of God
- Now we just have to hang onto those moments and stay the course!

Let us pray.

Father God, you know the weariness and confusion the struggles of life can create, especially when we not only try to meet the challenges of living day by day, but when we try to do so as your disciples, servants of your kingdom and bearers of your good news.

We are grateful for those moments when you reveal your glory and remind us of your plan, and we hunger even today to witness the transfiguration of Christ in our midst.

When we do, Father, and when we must afterward descend from the mountain to the valley below, help us to take comfort from the words you speak, that Christ is among us, and help us to heed you when you tell us to listen to him.

Yours are the words of life, and we have no where else to go, no one else to serve. We have seen your glory, and we have come to believe. Uphold us this and every day, through the hope of your glory that we have come to know in Jesus Christ by your grace and the witness of your Spirit. Amen.

[Read the text, from Bernard of Clairvaux]

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts,
the fount of life and our true light,
we seek the peace your love imparts,
and stand rejoicing in your sight.

We taste in you our living bread,
and long to feast upon you still;
We drink of you, the fountainhead,
our thirsting souls to quench and fill.

For you our restless spirits yearn
where'er our changing lot is cast';
glad, when your presence we discern,
blest, when our faith can hold you fast.

O Jesus, ever with us stay;
make all our moments calm and bright;
oh, chase the night of sin away,
shed o'er the world your holy light.