

February 14, 2021

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: Mark 9:2-9

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

Today's Gospel reading was about mountain men. No, not the smelly old trappers who tamed the wilds of our young county. These were a different kind of mountain men: Holy mountain men. They didn't go into the mountains to hide from the world nor did they seek their fortunes in gold or fur. These holy men were sent to mountains by God, so that He could show forth His power and authority. There were three holy mountain men and three holy mounts, and in our Gospel reading for today, three witnesses to it all. God likes the number three, no doubt because it describes Himself so well. The festival we celebrate today brings all three of them together: The Transfiguration of Our Lord.

This event is recorded in four different places in Scripture: In Matthew, Mark, Luke and in Second Peter as well. So when discussing big events in the life and ministry of Jesus, this is right at the top. After traveling north through Galilee, Jesus and His disciples kept going through the region of Iturea, even further north than Caesarea Philippi, out of Israel proper and into Syria. Finally they arrived at the foot of a mountain range, thousands of feet tall, which in the winter is covered with snow in the winter and today has a ski resort on it. The tallest mountain peak in the area is Mount Hermon which is 9,000 feet tall. For reference, our own Rib Mountain is only 1,900 ft tall. A nine thousand foot mountain is not that unusual and in Montana they are pretty common. In fact, we had a tradition in our family that whenever one of my sons turned ten years old, we went on a backpacking trip up a mountain at least that tall. So Jesus hiking up that mountain with Peter, James and John isn't unreasonable and it could easily be done in a long day. But I bet they didn't need to carry bear spray.

The three disciples didn't know what to expect on this little excursion. Six days earlier they had reached a milestone in their training: Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, finally, after two plus years together and that was only because Jesus prompted him by asking, "**Who do you say that I am?**" Then Jesus told them that He would be crucified, would die and would be raised again. And then Peter, who had just got a gold star in class, went on to stick his foot in his mouth as he tried to correct the same Christ he confessed. Jesus rebuked His star pupil, saying "**Get behind me Satan!**" and told them all about the cost of following Him, that if they lose their lives for His sake, they will save them. It had already been an eventful week for them all and now they had this field trip.

They probably thought it strange that Jesus had taken them so far from home to do a little mountain climbing. When they arrived at the foot of the mountain, He told the other nine to wait at the foot of the mountain while He took

Peter, James and John with Him. When they finally reached the top they saw a breathtaking sight – and I don't mean the view. They witnessed a theophany, a revelation of God Himself, there on the top of that mountain. Jesus was metamorphosed, or transformed, before their eyes and He began to shine with a brilliant light. Even His clothes were shining as Mark would later record; **“His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.”** (v.3) And as if a blindingly bright Jesus wasn't enough to terrify them, two figures appeared with Him on that mountain top, two other holy mountain men whom they had read about all their lives: Moses and Elijah.

These two were the greatest prophets of old, servants of God who had lead Israel in hard times. Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt across the Red Sea into a desert wilderness, where the people grumbled and complained. Ultimately God led them to a mountain, a holy mountain, called Mount Sinai. There God established a covenant with the people of Israel and Moses served as God's spokesman, going up the mountain to receive a message and coming back down to deliver it. While this was going on, the mountain peak was covered with fearsome, supernatural clouds and lit with fire and lightening. It was terrifying because God's presence is terrifying. God is awesome, in the original sense of the word: His presence inspires awe. More than that, being in the presence of God made Moses face shine, as it reflected the brilliance of the Creator. When Moses would come down off the mountain, the people asked him to wear a veil because it freaked them out. Even the reflected brilliance of God was awesome.

Elijah also served Israel during a hard time, except the threats were internal, not external. He confronted the idolatry and false worship promoted by the wicked King Ahab among his own people. After proving that Baal was an empty, false god, Elijah had the 400 priests of Baal slain. After this victory, one would think the people of Israel would repent... but then, sinful people *will be sinful* and ruthless, power-hungry rulers don't get where they are by admitting their mistakes. Ahab's queen, Jezebel, told Elijah he would die for killing her priests, and so he fled in fear, running into the wilderness to the south with nothing but the God's hand to support him. After forty days came to a mountain. The same holy mountain that Moses went up, Mount Sinai. There Elijah, who was hungry, tired and alone, was shown the difference between physical might and the power of God. He witnessed a great wind which tore the rocks apart, but God wasn't in the wind. Nor was God found in an earthquake or in a great fire. God was found in a whisper, in a quiet but powerful Word. God revealed Himself on that mountain to be the God of Elijah's fathers, but in a different way than He appeared to Moses. Same God, same mountain, but a different appearance.

Two holy mountain men. Each one was tested and each one was given a revelation of the Living God. And now, on Mount Hermon, both of them appeared by the will of Father to flank the Holy One of God, Christ Jesus the Lord. The sum of all promises made to and through those prophets was coming to pass. God's will for man was revealed in the Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets, and it was made manifest here on this mountain, Moses the giver of the Law and Elijah the premier prophet, with Jesus at the center. Proof that God likes a good metaphor.

As the three disciples knelt there in fear, Peter went with his gut instinct, which always seems to be “Don’t just stand there, do something!” In the midst of this wondrous revelation, Peter interrupts and asks if they should pitch some tents so that Jesus, Moses and Elijah would have a comfortable place to spend the night. It was a good instinct, to serve God and serve others, but it was misplaced. As if to emphasize this, a cloud overshadowed them and the voice of the Father said, **“This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.”** (v.7) Then Moses and Elijah disappeared. In case the three weren’t paying attention, the lesson was not that Jesus was equal with Moses and Elijah; they are not. God the Father made it very clear: It is Jesus we are to listen to. The Law and Prophets prepared the way and testified to His coming, but now the full revelation of God was at hand. Jesus is the face of God for all mankind. If you want to know God, if you want to really understand the Creator of the universe and His will for us, this is who you listen to. “God with us.”

Now, for those of you who can count to three, you’re probably thinking: Wait a minute... that’s might be three mountain men, but that’s only two holy mountains. And you are right, we’ve only mentioned two so far. The third is not really a mountain as much as a hill... kind of like Rib Mountain. Like Mount Sinai, this third mount has several names it is known by: Calvary, Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. It was that hill outside of Jerusalem that Jesus would set His face on, where He had already told the disciples He had to go. The promises made to patriarchs and prophets, through Moses and Elijah, would be fulfilled there, on the lowliest of the three mounts, on a cruel tree reserved for the worst criminals. There the power and mercy and love of God would be revealed not as it was to Moses, with fire and thunder, and not to Elijah, with a whisper, but with a cry of victory as Jesus declared, “It is finished.”

Three mountains, three mountain men. They are interrelated, woven together, but the last is the first, the lowliest given the most honor. When Jesus walked off the mount of the Transfiguration He walked toward His death and toward our eternal life. One last sacrifice, one last promise to be fulfilled, to bind it all together and bring us back into communion with God. He walked those 150 miles back to Jerusalem with one goal in mind: Your salvation. He carried His cross up that hill with one thought in mind: His Father’s will be done. He sprinkled that lowly mount with His holy blood and set us free from death forever. From Sinai to Hermon to Golgotha. The last mountain man is the greatest; Christ Jesus Our Lord.

In His holy and precious name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp