

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
21 February, Anno Domino 2024
St. Matthew 17:1-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved saints of God,

I don't need to tell you that this life is hard on so many levels. Schedules. Health scares. Politics. Conscience. Increasing costs of living. Threats of job loss. And the ever-present specter of death. At times you likely struggle with thoughts of impending doom. Some of you, I know, are in the midst of very deep struggles, some of which have been going on for some time. God grant you peace and the assurance of His good and gracious will for you.

Of course, the devil is always looking for a way to exploit these situations to pull your ears and your heart away from Christ, to overwhelm you with suffering, and to fill you with hopelessness and dread. He whispers about how senseless and cruel your suffering is and offers you a way to avoid it. He calls God's Word into question. "You must be really bad to deserve this! God can't be pleased with you if He allows this to happen to you!"

In those hours we long for hope. We long for assurance that all will turn out well. We cry out to God that He would just take these crosses and trials away from us. We truly believe that is the best thing that could be done for us. "Make my suffering go away - NOW. Heal me - NOW. Give me more money - NOW. Take away this temptation - NOW." We don't want the struggle. We don't want the fight. We always think that the best thing for us is to not be suffering.

Peter wanted to build tents for Jesus and Moses and Elijah so that they could stay in that glorious moment where everything was great, where Christ shone like the sun, where they were, for all intents and purposes, in heaven. And that is certainly the goal of our faith - to be right there with Christ in all His glory, to be with the patriarchs and

prophets and apostles and the martyrs and our parents who have closed their eyes in faith and our children whom our Lord saw fit to take before we could hold them and teach them. We groan to be free of this world of hatred and death and war and disease and false teaching and corruption and chemotherapy and brain lesions and divorce and pride and selfishness. We want it all to stop. Our Lord even bids us to hasten the coming day of the Lord and to pray for His quick return.

But Peter was trying to have the glory of heaven the wrong way. He was trying to get there without the cross. In chapter 16, Peter had made his great confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God but then he turns around and forbids Jesus from going to the cross, the defining work of the Christ. I'm sure you remember Jesus' response - "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." And after scolding Peter, Jesus tells us that to follow Him, who takes up His cross, we must take up our appointed cross and deny ourselves. There is no way around it. If you would follow Christ, if you would have a share in His kingdom, then you too must take up that which your heavenly Father appoints to you and lay aside your own wisdom and desires. YOU must be put to death so that a new man, conformed to the image of Jesus, can emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever, living only by faith in the Word of God.

But Peter thought he had found another way, another opportunity to avoid not only Jesus' cross but his own cross that was tied to Jesus' cross. "Maybe we can just stay here on this mountain where everything is wonderful and there is no cross and therefore no death, no suffering, no confessing your sin, no speaking God's Word to those who hate to hear it, no martyrdom. That's what we all want. We don't want to have the hard conversation with our children who are turning away from Christ and no longer going to church because we are afraid we'll just push them further away. We don't want to deny ourselves the trash masquerading as entertainment because our own sinful flesh enjoys it and our friends would think us weird if we didn't participate. We don't want to deny ourselves the opportunity for fun or money or rest on Sunday morning by drawing a line in the sand and saying nothing but an emergency or the sick bed will keep me from my Lord's gifts of life and salvation and the opportunity to study the Word of God with my fellow Christians. We don't want

to fast, to pray, to tithe because that means less for me. Those things means sacrifice and discomfort. We don't want to suffer in faith because we think we shouldn't really have to suffer. We associate suffering with failure, with God's wrath, with evil. Like Peter, we want heaven without Calvary.

Repent. Listen to Jesus as He talks to Moses and Elijah. Even as He is shining with the radiance of the sun, Christ is speaking with these prophets about His exodus, His death. This is the conversation of heaven. Not because it brings sorrow but because it is the only source of joy and comfort. It is the only reason that Moses, Elijah, and the rest of the saints who have gone before us are now part of that heavenly conversation. It was absolutely necessary FOR US that Jesus leave that mountain and set His shining face toward Jerusalem and His crucifixion. The cross wasn't some sad and unfortunate accident of history. The cross is not something for us to be ashamed of, embarrassed by, or even sad about. The cross of our Lord is our very life. It fills your Baptism with the righteousness of Jesus so that you may be assured of your own righteousness and your own adoption into God's kingdom. It is the atoning sacrifice for your sin accomplished on the cross that fills the bread and the wine so that you may taste and see that the Lord is good, so that you may open your mouth wide and your God may fill you with forgiveness and peace and strength.

The cross of Jesus is the promise of God that your cross is not only NOT a curse to you or punishment from God, but rather that through your cross you will be conformed to the image of Jesus and share in His glory. Your crosses, as foolish as it sounds to the world and as painful as it is to your flesh, are good. Contrary to reason, they are given to you by God precisely BECAUSE He loves you.

What Peter and James and John saw at the Transfiguration was shown to them for their strengthening. They would see terrible things done to God's Son who at the moment was shining with unveiled majesty. They would see Him betrayed by Judas into the hands of those who hated Him and would blaspheme Him and curse Him and condemn Him. They would see Him stripped of His clothes and all worldly dignity to be scourged and crowned with thorns and beaten with rods. They would see Him hanging from the cross at the height of His humiliation while malefactors railed

against Him and the chief priest, scribes, and Pharisees derided Him and taunted Him. They would see Jesus anything but shining and radiant.

But even as they were filled with fear and doubt, they would be strengthened to endure it all by the holy conversation which they were given to hear. This was the witness of Moses and the Prophets. The death of the Christ was the testimony of the Old Testament - all of it. This was the plan prepared by God from before even the foundation of the world. His only-begotten Son would suffer the death of sin for the whole world as the atoning sacrifice that man might be restored to God and have a place in the kingdom of heaven rather than being cast forever into the eternal furnace of God's wrath against sin.

This is the eternal song of heaven as we have been hearing from Revelation during Adult Bible Class. "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come! Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (Rev. 4:8b, 11; 5:9-10) The cross of Jesus is the joy and glory of the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven. It is your joy and glory to. There is no shame for you in Jesus' cross because it is the cross that has removed the shame of your sin. There is nothing ugly or hideous about the Jesus Christ crucified because His crucifixion is the death that gives you life and makes you beautiful in God's sight. And your Lord did not begrudgingly make that sacrifice. He rejoiced to do it. He would not flee from the cross. He would not seek another way. Because that would have been death for you. The cross of Jesus is our treasure. It is the most beautiful thing to the eyes of poor sinners who know it to be their redemption, their own exodus from damnation to eternal life.

And if the cross of your Lord, your brother Jesus is filled with such good and rich blessing, so is yours! Only faith can receive such a saying. Like your Savior, like Peter, like the host of martyrs and saints who now stand rejoicing in the unveiled presence of Christ, you can embrace your crosses like fools because you have the

promise that God will work all things to your eternal good. Only after the resurrection did Peter and the other apostles begin to understand that Jesus' glory was not found on the mountain of transfiguration. It was found on the mountain of His cross where God, in His immeasurable mercy, accomplished the salvation of the world through the death of His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased. Indeed, it was His Son's willingness to receive the cross according to His Father's will to save you, that made Him most pleasing to His Father. That is what true children do in faith. They receive the will of the heavenly Father trusting His promises and His faithfulness; they commend their spirit into His Fatherly hands knowing that their salvation is His good and gracious will, even though that requires their suffering and death.

That is not to say that your crosses are not painful. They most certainly are. And while you can certainly pray that God would bring them to an end, there is something far more important that you should pray for because you don't want God to take away something good just because you don't understand it. When a soldier is in the midst of battle what he needs most is ammunition to overthrow the enemy. He needs strength and courage to fight and endure and overcome. This is what you need. You need strength and ammunition against the devil's assaults. You need armor and courage to endure each shock and then to charge and press the battle forward. Pray for these things and then take up God's answer to your prayer - His Word, the testimony of Moses and Elijah and Peter.

The God you worship and trust is the God who delivered Israel from bondage and kept them in their wilderness wanderings miraculously providing them manna and bread and water. He kept Elijah even as Ahaz and Jezebel hunted him down like a wild animal because they hated God. He kept Peter even after Peter denied knowing Jesus and fled from Him and as Peter himself hung upside down on his own cross because of his confession of Jesus' name. They and countless others bear witness to the truth of that which you believe with your heart and confess with your tongue every morning as you rise and every evening as you lay down to sleep - that you believe in God the Father Almighty, in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. Your faith is not vain and neither is the cross which you bear. All who endure will stand with Moses and Elijah speaking with Christ.

Your cross is sent to you to purge you of all your idols and all your false treasures which are only harm to you as they are the devil's weapons to lead you away from Christ. And because everyone's idols are different so too are their crosses. For some it is money. For others it is health. For others it is wisdom. When God works to tear down these idols from your hearts, rejoice and give thanks because it is a sure sign that He loves you and is drawing you closer to Himself, your true and only God. And as your crosses weigh heavy upon you, pick up the Bible and the Small Catechism. Immerse yourself in them. Listen to Jesus who speaks through the prophets, the apostles, and the evangelists to strengthen you, to build you up, to encourage you, to help you bear your cross in faith so that you too may endure to the end, receive the crown of everlasting life, and have your share in the unending joy of heaven. For what we have seen at our Lord's transfiguration through the apostles' eyes is exactly what is promised to you who have borne your cross and gone to Calvary with Jesus, "who, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God...For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, **THAT WE MAY SHARE HIS HOLINESS**. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees..." (Hebrews 12:2, 10-12)

You don't know a better way than God. You may think that your cross is inappropriate or unfair or ill-conceived. So did Peter. Thus the Lord rebuked him from the cloud and pointed him to Jesus in whom alone we can endure our own crosses in faith by entrusting ourselves to the will of God our Father. There is no resurrection without death. You are enduring crosses, some that are excruciatingly heavy and painful. You are still God's beloved baptized child in whom He is well-pleased. God does delight in you. He delights in your good and working out your salvation more than even you do. And He loves you enough to give you those hard things that are needed to keep you safely nestled in His arms and deliver you from what is truly evil.

Listen to Jesus. Listen only to Jesus. Listen to the Scriptures. Don't listen to your pain or your sorrow or your reason or your feelings. Listen to Jesus. He has trodden the path through the cross before you to make it safe and a source of life for you. He has

said to you “Rise and have no fear.” Do not despise your cross and try to flee from it. God will deliver you just as He delivered Jesus. Pray for strength. Pray for courage. Pray for faith. Read your Bible. There you will find all of them because you will see Jesus.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your heart and your minds in Christ Jesus.