

Transfiguration of Our Lord: February 2, 2020

“What Did They See?”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I am constantly reminded of just how unpopular the Christian faith truly is. To stand on the truth of moral principles set forth by the One True God, doesn't make many friends. I learned this last week that tonight is the Super Bowl. Tonight is a highly anticipated T.V. event, but not just for the game. Many gather to visit during the game, and what many truly wait for are the commercials. It is often not known just how political even these short blurbs can be; but here's my point—a commercial was put together by a pro-life group. The ads this year will feature political candidates and drag queens, but there is no spot for abortion survivors. To believe that life, all life, is given and sustained by God, and that no child is a mistake, ever, and that every human is made in the image of God is unpopular.

What stands in the way? Human wisdom. When you discuss the faith with unbelievers – and all too often with others who claim to be believers – they respond with comments like, “That just doesn't make sense. How can this be? How do you know?” Reason takes one quick look at the world around them and instantly dismisses the reality that God has designed.

Words of disbelief can even turn into tones of accusation, “You shouldn't let that God-stuff go to your heads.” I was told once, “You should get your head out of the clouds. Be careful that you don't become too heavenly minded, that you are no longer earthly good.” What?!?! Talk about an epic fail of a perspective. It does have some merit, and best construction, they are wanting to maintain the importance of living a Christian life, but it must not, cannot, be done at the expense of Christ Himself. You cannot forsake the Creator for the sake of creation, to do so, turns creation into god.

I called the Christian faith unpopular because even so-called Christian churches are abandoning it. There are congregations in our own Synod that have stopped using the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed. Some have quit doing the confession of sins, saying it makes people feel "uncomfortable". Many congregations, particularly

mission congregations, don't want to identify themselves as Missouri Synod because they think that the name carries with it a connotation of being narrow-minded and rigid and strict. I don't disagree with those judgments, except I choose to sum up all of those negative sounding attributes with the single word "faithful."

For decades churches have been running away from Biblical morality. In recent years it became stylish in the Christian community to run away from doctrine. There always have been some denominations that would not stand on the truth of the Word of God, but today almost no Christian denomination considers sound doctrine to be vital. Even the Missouri Synod, which does formally confess the truth of God's Word, regularly tolerates defections from the sound doctrine. Today, many congregations are fleeing from sound and historic practice. The result is that our Synod's public stance can be a mere paper-confession with no consistent teaching or church-practice behind it. Many pastors and lay people in our congregations have put their heads in the sand. Rather than reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting the Word and working through the Confessions, many are content to "let someone else do it."

Many see the problems of the world, and I think, truly believe God has nothing to say, or doesn't care. Many turn to everything else, and shy away from God, and His gifts, because it is not popular, or fun, or entertaining to come to church. Many believe nothing truly happens here, because look at what we do. You sit and listen. I stand and talk. I tell you to do better, and you don't. I tell you to care for each other, and I don't care about any of you, or at least in the ways that all of you want me to. You have your own ideas about God, I do too, and if we open these words, truly believing that God Himself is speaking, we are going to find out that we are not completely correct. We are going to see our need for a savior, and be faced with the words of the Savior Himself. We argue with each other, but there is no arguing with God.

Christianity is not popular. It's not popular to sit and listen, because you already know it all, don't you? You have no more to learn, no more to hear, and so let's just have a party; those are popular. It would give you something to see, but faith comes from hearing, not doing. Hearing is not popular, and this is part of what Jesus was referring to when said in Luke 10, "***I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding***

*and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”*¹

So what did they see? Today is Transfiguration Sunday. In some ways, the Transfiguration is about God hiding things. It is well-pleasing in the sight of God to hide certain things from the so-called clever people of the world. Will they rely on their own eyes or like-children, will they rely on the eyes of faith? Sadly, even the great and awesome work of God in nature is being described more and more frequently as nothing more than a natural phenomenon, not requiring the presence of a deity whatsoever.

God is pleased to hide what He does and where He is working and even His own presence from people, so that they might believe -- or not. Since Christmas we have been reminded of one thing, the glory of God was hidden in Jesus Christ. He did not look like God. He was singularly unimpressive. The prophets had said He would be. He looked like a normal guy. He didn't have a cape, or wear his underwear outside of his tights, or have any other distinguishing feature to set him aside from any other earthly man. Jesus was God hidden in the disguise of human flesh, and for most people the disguise was perfect.

His power was made perfect in weakness, and Jesus was at His best when He seemed to be at His worst.² He was actually working out our salvation when He appeared to be completely losing control, even of His own life. The naked injustice of His conviction and sentencing by the legal standards of the Jews and of the Romans was clearly an outward reflection of the inward truth that this One was innocent, and that what He faced, and what He suffered, and the death He died on the cross, was not His; it was yours.

¹ Luke 10:21–24

² 2 Corinthians 12:9

As the world sees defeat, Jesus was displaying victory. Just when it looked like Jesus' enemies had finally won, they actually suffered total defeat. Just when it seemed that it was all over for Jesus and His followers, it was just beginning. Jesus was not put to death on the cross helplessly. He deliberately laid down His life at the time and in the way of His own choosing. Jesus said, ***“I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”***³

What does this mean? When Satan gloated in what he thought was victory, and when the Jewish leaders dusted off their hands and said, “Finally, the trouble-maker is silenced” – Jesus claimed flawless victory. It is finished! All sins paid. Forgiveness won. God’s wrath against your sin was poured out upon Him. God’s perfect image was restored, and all human life from the womb, from conception forward, had Jesus’ blood paying for its sin.

But that is not what it looked like. No one saw God at work. No one recognized His glory – except a Roman Centurion, and even that was late in coming. The Transfiguration was about God, who hides things, peeking through the veil of the humanity of Jesus for just a moment, revealing His true Glory where no one was able to see it before.

Transfiguration Sunday is about God giving us a glimpse of what our sinful nature simply cannot see -- does not want to see. God revealed Himself in Jesus, and in Jesus He demonstrated that God is not where we think. It is not about our definition, our reason, our smartness, our cleverness, our craftiness. He works, even when we don’t see Him; quite often in situations we would never choose and frequently forget to look at to find His purposes. He holds us to values we would many times sooner discard as old-fashioned and out of date. He makes things necessary that some might consider expendable, like truth and confession, life in the womb, on the hospital bed, in the nursing home room, on the street, in the bar, in the store, across the street, in my own house. He shows trust in God in impossible seeming circumstances and faithfulness to what we know is true and right, and love for other people, especially for one another.

³ Luke 10:17-18

Here is an example: Jesus says, “***I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***”⁴ This means that it is only through Jesus we can know God. Apart from the Bible, who would know that? It is generally believed by many in our culture that all religions lead to God. Most people think that all Gods are really the same God under different labels. There are even many who call themselves Christians who believe that Jesus is only one way to get to heaven. Many have disregarded God’s Word for their own wisdom. They have rejected the words of Acts, “***There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.***”⁵

They look around and see all of those who don’t know God, or worse, have rejected His preaching and His Word; and rather than having the hard conversations around the Word of God, it is much easier to convince myself that God has changed. It is easier to see what the world wants me to see than it is to see what God says. It is easier and sometimes more comfortable, at least for a time, to believe in my own ideas, because I am an adult, and I know it all. My ears of faith are stopped by my eyes of reason.

Why did Jesus take three men, Peter, James, and John, with Him into the Mountains? Because of the Law of God and justice of Old Testament Israel required the eye-witness account of more than a single witness. They required the witness of two or three. Three was the ideal number - when you had three independent witnesses to an event, you had proper legal witness to establish an account as fact. In other words, the presence of Peter and James and John are your assurance that this event actually took place.

But, What did they see? The word "transfiguration" literally means "*being changed or transformed from one figure, body, shape, or appearance, into another.*" What happened with Jesus was not a change of shape or body; His body remained the same. It was a change of appearance, in that Jesus began to glow - or shine with an unearthly light. What was actually occurring was that the glory of God was shining through the veil of flesh and humanity of Jesus. It was not obliterating it, or changing it substantially, but it was simply shining through.

⁴ John 14:6

⁵ Acts 4:12

What did they see? Moses and Elijah. Moses the great Law-giver, and Elijah the prophet among prophets; each man represented their portion of Scripture. Each one recognizes Jesus and points to Him as the Savior. Luke even tells us that they were talking with Jesus about “*His exodus which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*” The Law and prophets are all talking about Christ, and His cross for you.

What did they see? The bright cloud overshadowed them, and they heard the voice of God. They heard the same words at Jesus’ baptism. The only other place I remember these words coming into play is when the angels tell the shepherds at Bethlehem that God will give peace to men on earth to all among whom His favor is found; that is those who are in Christ. These words comfort us by reminding us that Jesus has the judgment of God against sin upon Himself, and because of it—you may receive that Peace on Earth of which the angels sang.

What did they see? Through Jesus, they saw God. They beheld with their eyes, something only faith could understand. There was no rational explanation, and to any reasonable person who heard their account, they would be nothing but the incoherent ramblings of a mad man.

What did they see? The glory of God. It was not as they defined or imagined. They saw God and they bore witness for us. These same men saw the same Jesus crucified, buried and risen from the dead. These same men saw Jesus in the Lord’s Supper, in Holy Baptism, in the hearing and proclamation of His Word. This same Jesus is here, in your hearing, in your baptism, on this altar. It’s not popular, and it rationally makes no sense, but here is God for you. Here is God joining you to His death and resurrection in water. Here is God speaking His life and strength and comfort to you in His Word. Here is God giving you His body and His blood shed on the cross for your salvation and your life.

“Fulfiller of the past And hope of things to be, We hail Thy body glorified
And our redemption see.”⁶ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁶ 'Tis Good, Lord, to Be Here LSB 414:3

Prayer of the Church
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
2 February 2020

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. Heavenly Father, You admonish Your children to listen to Your Son. Give us ears to hear Him, as He speaks to us through His Holy Word and Sacraments, and give us faith to believe that He delivers forgiveness, life and salvation to us through the same. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

While Your Son commanded Peter, James and John to tell no one what they had witnessed on the Mount of Transfiguration until He was raised from the dead, He charged them, and the rest of His apostles, after His resurrection to go out into all the world and proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name. Continue to raise up faithful men for this task, and bless all pastors with bold confidence in Your prophetic Word. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You resist the proud and give grace to the humble. Grant us true humility after the likeness of Your Son, our Lord, that we may never be arrogant or prideful and thus provoke Your wrath, but in all lowliness be made partakers of Your grace. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Almighty and gracious God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we thank You for the many blessings which You have showered upon Pastor Klinge, his wife Debbie, and the saints of St. John's, State Center, especially for the Gospel and the Holy Sacraments and for Your continued presence with Your people. We rejoice in Your goodness and in the promise that You will never leave us or forsake us. Grant that no one may be left without the preaching of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments. Bless Your Church throughout the world so that she may give faithful witness to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ both in word and deed. Preserve and protect Your people at all times, and bring them at last to the heavenly home which You have prepared for all who serve You in faith and love. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In order to maintain peace and order in our world, You place authorities over us. Bless the leaders of the world and give them wisdom to govern according to Your will. Where there is strife and conflict, bring reconciliation and peace. Where there is persecution, bring freedom. And help us to be good citizens as we carry out our various vocations. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Look down with mercy upon all those who are sick, hospitalized, homebound or suffering in any way [*especially Larry, Zoey, Carmen, Susan, and those we name in our hearts*]. Provide them with compassionate care and knowledgeable physicians. And send pastors to deliver Christ and His gifts to them, so that they would be comforted in their time of need. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, our times are in Your hands. Look with favor, we pray, on Your servants whom you have granted another year of earthly life, especially *David*. Grant that *they* may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen *their* trust in Your goodness all the days of *their* life; Lord in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Bless all those who approach the holy altar to receive Your Son's body and blood this day, that they would come in repentance and faith and depart in the peace only Your Son can give. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We give You thanks for all the faithful witnesses who have gone before us and have now received their heavenly reward. Fill us with Your Spirit, that we would remain steadfast in Your prophetic and apostolic Word until we are called out of this vale of tears to join them in the place Your Son has prepared for us. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Through Him, with Him and in Him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours, forever and ever. **Amen.**