

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

March 3, 2019

Luke 9:28-36

“Listen to Him”

It's all downhill from here. Peter, James and John went up this mountain with Jesus to pray. Waking from another careless sleep, they are astonished at what they see. Jesus is transfigured. He's shining: Not like a spotlight from above that throws Him into sharp relief. No, He's shining from the inside out. His clothes are white as a lightning flash. Elijah and Moses have appeared and are speaking with Him about events to come. And then, to top it all off, a cloud envelops them and the Father's voice declares, "This is My Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him!"

Now, take a moment to review what happens there; for if this does not convince the disciples of Jesus' identity, one has to wonder what will.

Jesus radiates white, lightning-like light. This is not something that an ordinary man does. In fact, this is something that Almighty God does, as He appears in white and fire on His throne in Daniel 7. This is exhibit A that Jesus is the Son of God.

Exhibit B: Moses and Elijah, who died so many centuries before, are alive and present and speaking with Jesus. They aren't instructing Him as if He's in need of their counsel and advice. No, they're talking about Him and what He is about to do. The ESV says they speak of His "departure," but the literal word is "exodus;" they are speaking of His death through which He will set His people free. They are bowing to Him, not vice versa. So what? Consider this: It was to Moses that God gave the Law and Mt. Sinai, and it was Elijah who defeated the 450 prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mt. Carmel, cementing his place in history as the foremost of the prophets after Moses. These two mountain men came to represent the Law and the Prophets; and the "Law and the Prophets" was a name for the Old Testament scriptures. Therefore, as Moses and Elijah defer to Jesus on this mountaintop, they declare that the Old Testament scriptures-the Law and the Prophets-point to Jesus, too. Therefore, Jesus is the Messiah they've been waiting for.

Exhibit C is even more convincing: A cloud appears and overshadows the disoriented and fearful disciples, enveloping them. It's not your average cloud, but a very Old Testament cloud-the kind of cloud that led the people of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the wilderness. The kind of cloud that descended on Mt. Sinai when God gave the Commandments to Moses. The kind of cloud that filled the tabernacle and the temple, driving out the priests because of its glory. No, this is no ordinary cloud; rather, it indicates that God the Father has come on the scene, to button down who Jesus is. And so the Father declares, "This is My Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him!"

Peter, James and John should have no doubt: Their teacher Jesus is most certainly the Son of God, fully human and fully divine, the long-awaited Savior promised by God. On this mountain, the Lord makes this apparent to their eyes and their ears. No matter what happens from here

on out, they can look back at this mountain, this Transfiguration, and be sure that He is the Savior.

Such memories are important because, just like that, things are back to normal. No glistening white, no Moses, no Elijah, no cloud, no voice. Just three dazed disciples and Jesus. For an all-too-brief moment, they had a hint of His glory. Now He looks plain again.

And from here on, it's all downhill. Jesus will never look like that again before He ascends in a cloud. Now, He's going to go back down this mountain, do some more miracles and teach more about the kingdom of God. And as He goes along, people are going to start to reject Him even more. The disciples have already heard one ominous statement; just eight days before the Transfiguration, Jesus told them that He would be crucified. If it was hard to believe eight days ago, it must be impossible to fathom in the midst of the Transfiguration. But it will happen soon enough, because that is why the Savior has come.

Before the cross and its shame, though, the Lord gives Peter, James and John a hint of His glory on the mountain that day. And along with exhibits A, B and C, they will do well to remember the last words spoken by God the Father: "Listen to Him."

Listen to what Jesus has to say, for the Transfiguration certainly shows that He speaks with authority. The Lord has no credibility problem: What He says is to be believed.

"Listen to Him" because He speaks His powerful, faith-giving Word. No matter how glorious the display of His majesty, God doesn't save by His glory apart from His Word. His glory may convince man of His existence and power; but He uses His Word to give them faith to believe that He is also gracious and merciful.

And finally, "Listen to Him" and the Word He declares, because the faith He gives can enable the disciples to believe in what they can't see-in spite of what they do see. It's only a matter of time until Jesus goes up another mountain-a hill, really, but one that He'll barely be able to climb. The hill is named Calvary, and Jesus will be crucified at its summit. He won't look very glorious when the Roman palace guard is done scourging and beating Him. He won't look very powerful when He's too weak and battered to carry His cross up the hill. He won't look like the King of kings with a crown of thorns jammed down on His brow. And He sure won't look like the Son of God when He's up there between two thieves instead of Moses and Elijah.

So the Father cautions and admonishes these three, "Listen to Him." Appearances change, but the Word of the Lord remains the same. Before the Transfiguration, Jesus has told them that He's going to be crucified and raised from the dead, and that Word will be fulfilled. And while the appearance of the Word made flesh looks far different on the cross, He remains the same Savior that He was on the mountain, doing exactly what He came to do: redeem man by dying his death and suffering God's judgment for his sin.

The Lord tells Peter, James and John to focus on the Word because appearances are powerful and will often seem to contradict God's Word. Peter will see Jesus betrayed and arrested, and that will lead him to deny Jesus three times that night. When Jesus is raised from the dead, it may well appear that Peter has proven too much of a coward to be a disciple, but the Lord restores him. How?

With His Word: "Feed My sheep," and "Follow Me" (Jn 21:17-19). Listen to Him, Peter, for thereby you are restored.

All of this lies in the near future for Peter, James and John; so on this mount of Transfiguration, the Lord does two things for them. First, He proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that He is, in fact, the Son of God, fully divine as well as fully human. Second, because the evident glory will not last, He points them back to His Word; for no matter how things appear, His Word remains forever.

On that mount of Transfiguration, He is doing the same for you. He is transfigured there to show His glory, so that you may know that He is the Son of God, your Savior. And since you and I couldn't be there to witness it with our eyes, He witnesses of it by His Word to our ears. He tells us, too, of the bright light, the presence of Moses and Elijah, and the Father's testimony; and because He tells us about these things in His holy Word, we can be even more sure than if we had seen them with our own eyes.

So, as we hear this Sunday of the Transfiguration of our Lord, remember the Word and remember the glory.

First, as the Father instructs from the cloud, "Listen to Him." Listen to the Son of God and His Word to you. Listen to His Law and know that not one jot or tittle has passed away (Matt. 5:18). Listen to His declaration of the Gospel and know that He who has died on the cross in your place still forgives you for all of your sins.

Listen to Him no matter what appearances may lead you to believe, for the devil will use appearances to make you doubt the Word of God. After the Transfiguration, the disciples had to witness Jesus' rejection, betrayal, crucifixion and death. Three days later, they saw the glory of His Resurrection, then witnessed His ascension forty days after that. Afterwards, they would see persecution, exile and death. In such times, all they would have is the Word.

The last thing the devil wants to do is have you hear the Lord speak, so he comes up with many tactics to prevent it. He will make sin appear to be permissible, enjoyable, maybe beneficial in the short-term. The Word of the Lord-which you are commanded to hear-declares that enjoyable and "helpful" sin is still an offense to God that seeks to destroy your faith; so expect the evil one to bombard you with appearances and events to distract you from God's Word and make that sin look all the more attractive. In other words, we are tempted to believe that "If it feels right for me, then it must be okay;" listening to the Word, we respond, "No matter how it feels, it's wrong if God says it's wrong." Similarly, we might find ourselves saying, "I kind of like

that sin, and don't really feel that sorry for it." Listening to the Word, we must firmly say, "Even if I don't feel like confessing it, by faith I believe the Word that it was a sin that I must confess."

At the same time, the devil may make use of sins you've committed to make it seem like the Lord could never forgive you. Guilt can bring on a despair from which there seems to be no relief. But far more certain than that crushing load is that Christ has died for your sins. Hearing the Word, we battle back and say, "Even if I do not feel forgiven, Jesus promises that He forgives me."

Furthermore, the devil will do his best to make it appear like the Lord has forgotten you. As the world continues to slouch closer and closer to destruction, the devil will do his best to convince the Church that the Lord isn't going to return. You see, when terribly afflicted, the people of God cry out, "How long, O Lord?" If they look for the answer in what they see, the answer is a horrible silence. But if they continue to listen to the Word, they know that the Lord will faithfully return in His time.

So the devil and your own sinful flesh seek to do the same to you, personally and carefully selecting whatever afflictions will most effectively make you miserable. It may be a matter of ill health, because chronic pain and medicinal side effects will seek to shout louder than God's Word. It may be a matter of loneliness, and your Old Adam will use that isolation from others to make you feel isolated from the Lord. It may be a matter of unbearable stress, tempting you to wonder if the Lord were indeed powerful, why would you have to suffer so?

Now, all of these things are more than just appearances-the pains and hurts are real enough. But what is not true is the appearance that these are more powerful than the Lord's Word; and so the Lord calls you to continue to listen to Him. Illness and loneliness and stress will claim that God is out to get you, but don't expect the wages of sin to preach a good sermon. Instead, hear the Word of the Lord. So much does the Lord love you that He has already gone to the cross to redeem you. He promises that He will relieve you from all your afflictions in His time; in the meantime, He has already relieved you of your sin and given you everlasting life.

The Lord looked glorious at the Transfiguration, and anything but glorious on Calvary. You and I must at times endure dark moments when the Lord seems neither glorious, nor near, nor merciful. But you have His Word that He forgives you, is with you, and will not forsake you. Listen to Him.

And especially listen to Him when He speaks His Word of grace and forgiveness to you. Cling to His promise that He has made you His own in Baptism. Hold fast to His Absolution and His Word, "I forgive you." Do not let go of the promise He makes when He says, "Take and eat, this is My body...take and drink, this is My blood...for the forgiveness of sins." For by these words, the same Lord who was transfigured in glory, crucified for your sin and raised for eternal life, is with you. Listen to Him, for by His Word He remains with you.

He remains with you, and you have His Word on it. So you can say with St. Paul: For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ro. 8:38-39)

This is true in your time in this world, that the Lord continues to preserve you by His Word. It is also true that, when delivered from this world, you will see the Word confirmed by the Lord's appearance in all of His glory. Your comfort is not just that the Lord is with you as you endure in this life; your comfort is the hope that, in Christ, you will out-live your afflictions for eternity. This comfort and hope is real, because you have the Lord's Word on it. Would you like to hear that guarantee? Then listen to Him now: You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen