

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I've had a lot of time during this pandemic to listen to podcasts and recently signed up for a three-month trial of YouTube premium. That means I can watch YouTube videos without commercial interruptions. I can also turn off my phone, or switch to another app and still listen to the YouTube audio. Those are all really nice features that I just might be willing to pay for now that I've tried them. (Be careful with free trials!)

Many of you already know of my amateur interest in the American space program, and especially the Apollo missions to the moon. Thanks to YouTube, I found some new material this week, recordings of the annual John Glenn lecture series on space history at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. One of those in particular struck me as relevant to our readings this morning. It was about the Apollo 13 mission. Maybe you've seen the movie, the one directed by Ron Howard and starring Tom Hanks. Apollo 13 was supposed to have been the 3rd moon-landing mission, but about half way to the moon an oxygen tank exploded and cut off the power to the main crew capsule. The astronauts had to use the lunar lander as a lifeboat in order to survive long enough to return to earth. It's a riveting story with a number of different problems that had to be solved in order to bring the crew back safely. It has become known as NASA's finest hour. What the YouTube video revealed though, was that a big reason for their ability to solve all of those life-threatening problems was the fact that they had repeatedly trained for them in the months and years leading up to the mission. You see, the way the astronauts trained was by sitting in simulators day after day and working through every possible scenario that they could think of, anything that could possibly go wrong. They had been through the mission hundreds of times in the simulators, so when the real thing happened, they knew exactly what to do. Hold that thought, now, because I'm going to come back to it.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, as Caitlyn has already told you. Although this is one of the six major festivals of the church calendar, it is without a doubt the least understood and least appreciated of them all. And this is true even among pastors. Without fail, every year in text study someone, or maybe a couple of someones, will grumble about having to preach on the Transfiguration again. I never hear anyone complain about preaching a Christmas sermon, or an Easter sermon again. The Transfiguration is a weird story, to be sure. And this year we get a weird first reading to go along with it. The key is to look how both stories function in the larger narrative in which they're placed. That way we also get some idea of what they mean for us.

The reading from 1 Kings is the succession story of Elijah and Elisha. But interestingly, Elijah is not in charge of this succession. Elisha clearly wants to be his successor, but Elijah makes it clear that it's not up to him, implying that that is God's decision. But then he tells Elisha, "this is how you'll know – if you witness me departing, you're my successor." And so it happens. There are other things going on here, but for our purposes this morning, that's enough.

It seems to me that the Transfiguration can be seen to function in a similar way in the Gospels, including here in Mark. To see that, it's crucial to notice how it fits into the larger context of the whole Gospel, what comes before and after today's reading. What comes just before this incident in Mark is the so-called confession of Peter. That's when Jesus asks the disciples who people say that Jesus is. Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah or another prophet. And then Jesus asks them what they think, and Peter pipes up and says, you're the Messiah – the promised king, which of course is the right answer. But then Jesus starts talking

about going to Jerusalem and being betrayed and put to death. That's *not* what a king is supposed to do, and so Peter rebukes him. And then Jesus rebukes Peter. "Get behind me, Satan," he says, "you're being an obstacle to God." And then he tells the disciples, "to follow me is to take up your own cross," in other words, to face your own death for the sake of the gospel.

So, there's probably some tension in the group as Jesus leads them up the mountain of Transfiguration six days later. And up on the mountain they see a vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, confirmation that Peter's confession was correct. Jesus is the Messiah. But it is the next thing that happens that is crucial to the whole story, maybe the whole Gospel. "This is my son," says God's voice from the cloud, "*listen to him!*" Because we read our readings on Sunday morning out of context, for the longest time I thought this meant, "Listen to what he's about to tell you." But if you think about the context, I pretty sure God means to say, "Listen to what he has already said to you. He's going to Jerusalem to die. And you're going with him.

But not to die. Not yet, anyway. And here's the connection with the Elijah/Elisha story, and to us, I think. The disciples do follow Jesus to Jerusalem. Like Elisha, they witness their master's departure. In fact, in Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, he tells us explicitly that what Jesus is talking about to Moses and Elijah is his "departure," his "exodus." It is in witnessing Jesus death and resurrection that the disciples become Jesus' successors. (In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples that they will do even greater things than he has done because he is returning to his father. They're staying behind to continue his work. You see, in the real Bible, being "left behind" is a good thing!) And by the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that impels and fills Jesus, the disciples take the mantle from Jesus, as it were, and together with generations of successors that follow them, they spread Jesus message of repentance and trust in God's good news throughout the world.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we too stand in that line of succession. And as we are about to enter the season of Lent, we are in a good place up here on the mount of Transfiguration, to get a big picture of what we are doing. The virtue of being a part of a liturgical tradition tied to a liturgical calendar is that every year we follow Jesus from his birth in Bethlehem, through his journey to Jerusalem to his death on the cross, and from there out the other side of the grave to resurrection life and the life of the church that follows. From up here on Transfiguration Sunday, we can see the whole Church year. Seven weeks back was Christmas. Seven weeks forward is Easter. And seven weeks after that is Pentecost, the beginning of the church's mission. It is by following Jesus in this way, year after year, witnessing again and again his life, death, resurrection, and ascension through the liturgical calendar, that we live into our baptismal calling to be his successors and agents in God's ongoing creative and redeeming work in the world.

And that's my connection to the Apollo astronauts in training. Each church year runs us through another scenario of the life and mission of Jesus from beginning to end, over, and over, and over again, to prepares us for our mission as God's agents of love and reconciliation out in the world that God loves and came to save. We are being equipped to live and serve faithfully no matter what the world throws at us, even a global pandemic. So, let's stick with it. Back into the simulator! Let's run this thing again. Into Lent we go!

And as we go, God goes with us in Jesus Christ, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.