

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Luke 9:28-36

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

Most of you know that one of my non-professional interests is the U.S. space program, particularly of the 1960s and early 70s when we landed people on the moon six times. I've watched as many documentaries and interviews and panel discussions on YouTube as I can find. One I watched recently was from the 40th anniversary of the first moon landing when it was mentioned that Walter Cronkite had just died, who had been such an important advocate of the space program. That led me to a documentary about Walter Cronkite and the space program, which then led me to think about how much things have changed since those days when it comes to news about current events. Those of you who are younger than me by more than a few years might have no idea who Walter Cronkite was. He was what used to be called an anchorman, the main news presenter for the CBS evening news for two decades. At one point he was voted the most trusted man in America. In those days there were only three television networks – ABC, NBC, and CBS. Younger folks might know them by their smart TV apps today. Besides newspapers and radio, these were the only places where you could get news in those days. Because of that, there was a broad consensus in the country about what was trustworthy news. Sure there were different opinions on what events meant or whether government policies were good or bad. But there was little doubt about the facts. Of course there were the conspiracy theorists even then claiming that the moon landings were a hoax. But they were very marginalized. They didn't have access to an audience. They were your crazy uncle and a couple of his drinking buddies. Most people watched and trusted Walter Cronkite and his counterparts on the other major networks. Cronkite finished each of his broadcast with his tagline, "And that's the way it is." And people believed him. As you know, times have changed since then. Cable TV and then the internet created new platforms for sharing information, and of course, disinformation. Now even the wildest and most hateful ideas can reach a wide audience, and this has vastly eroded the consensus about what is true and what is false. How do you know? Who do you listen to?

I'm sure you're all aware by now that President Vladimir Putin of Russia has launched an invasion of Ukraine, as our government has been predicting now for many weeks. If you've read my newsletter article that came out yesterday, you already know my thoughts on this. What I didn't mention there is that Putin came to power soon after my family and I moved to Russia in 1999, and one of the things he did in his first years in office was to take control of the independent media. He was a former KGB agent. He knew the importance of controlling the news. As a result, what is being broadcast by the state-controlled media in Russia about the invasion of Ukraine is that it is a military operation to save ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine who, it is claimed, are being massacred by ethnic Ukrainians. Of course there is no evidence of this, and that's because it's a bald-faced lie manufactured to give a pretext for occupying Ukraine and installing a puppet regime who will be friendly to Moscow and Russian interests. But when you control the media, whether it's broadcast, cable, or internet, you can get lots of people to believe even bald-faced lies. And if you've been paying attention in recent years, you know that such manipulation happens not only in places like Russia and China, but right here at home.

It's easy to forget that the story of Jesus conveyed in the four Gospels of the New Testament takes place in another country under occupation by a foreign army. It's easy to forget that when the people of Jesus' homeland heard he might be the Messiah, they were imagining a national hero who would liberate them from their occupation and restore them to the glory days of David and Solomon. Today's Gospel reading from Luke takes place soon after Jesus conducted a quick survey

with his disciples of what people were saying about him. Some were saying he was John the Baptist, others Elijah or one of the other ancient prophets of Israel. There was no mass media in those days. There was Roman propaganda that took the form of monuments and parades, and there was word of mouth. So everybody had their own ideas. Who do you believe? How would you know? So maybe a little like our own time now in that regard. Then Jesus asked his disciples who *they* thought he was. Peter answered, “the Messiah,” and Jesus asked them to keep that a secret, because they could not yet understand what that meant.

The Transfiguration that we commemorate today is strange: It’s Jesus up on a mountaintop conferring with Moses and Elijah, his face shining like Moses’ did at mount Sinai, and the voice of God speaking from the cloud. Even pastors are sometimes at a loss as to what to make of it. It depends on images and references that are foreign to our culture and experience. I think, though, that it’s not too hard to understand how it functions in the story that the Gospel writers are telling. After establishing that he *is* the Messiah, but not the Messiah they’re expecting, he goes on to tell him that he must now go to Jerusalem to be handed over to the authorities and put to death. But also then to rise from the dead. Then we get today’s story. And then, only a few verses later, another announcement of his impending death. But the disciples don’t understand and are afraid to ask him anything. That doesn’t sound like the warrior and liberator they’ve been hoping for. How this story functions in the Gospels is that amidst all of the confusion, misunderstanding, and disappointment of the disciples and the people as a whole we get the voice of God speaking these words: “This is my son. *Listen* to him.” Or really, the emphasis should be, “Listen to *him*.” “This is my son,” says God. “He’s not John the Baptist, he’s not Elijah, who you see standing here with him. He is my son. Listen to *him*. Not your friend who told you he was one of the prophets, not your uncle who knows somebody who is good friends with the chief priest. Listen to my son. He is going to tell you some difficult things. He is going to challenge your assumptions about the world and who is in charge. Listen to *him*.”

Jesus on either side of today’s reading tries to make it clear to his disciples that he is definitely not the kind of Messiah that they’ve been hoping for, the national hero who will raise an army like David did and drive out the foreign occupiers. He is instead going to his death. But not just to death – through death to resurrection and new life. He *is* the Messiah, and he means to establish the Kingdom of God. But he will not rule like we rule, and his kingdom will not be like our kingdoms.

One of the things that Jesus has just said, right before our reading starts, one of the things that I think God’s voice was telling the disciples to listen to, was this: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” And then this: “What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?” Sisters and brothers in Christ, all around us we see efforts to “gain the whole world” while forfeiting ourselves. President Putin’s rash and murderous invasion of Ukraine is just the latest and most blatant example. But it’s by no means the only one. Political parties, politicians, businesses, and ordinary folks like you and me are all engaged in our own efforts to “gain the world,” to advantage ourselves at the expense of others, and to spin our own propaganda to justify and advance our selfish causes. We are occupied by sin, in other words, and cannot free ourselves. Jesus is the kind of Messiah who, by means of a cross and a tomb, is at work to free us from that occupation. He promises us that the way to life that really is life is not by destroying our enemies by any means possible, but by trusting in God’s love and forgiveness for us and for all people, and having our hearts opened to the world God loves. The kingdom of God is near, says Jesus, even when it seems very far away. Listen to him. Trust that promise, and believe that “that’s the way it is.” And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.