The Transfiguration of Our Lord, March 2, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 9:28-36 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

If you happened to read my article in the March newsletter that came out on Friday, you came prepared to celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord this Sunday. You know that the Transfiguration was a turning point in Jesus' earthly ministry and why it is such a fitting festival to celebrate today on the last Sunday before Lent. If you didn't happen to read it, I commend it to your attention for some background information that I won't talk about now. What I *do* want to do is dig a little deeper into this strange event in the Gospels and how it can provide a pattern for understanding the nature of our lives of faith. I think I've mentioned to you before, on another Transfiguration Sunday, that my father taught an entire semester high school course at the Lutheran High School I attended called "Moses, Elijah, and Christ." The Transfiguration was the organizing theme that helped students think about how Jesus was connected with what had happened before him in the history of God's people, but also how Jesus was a radically new development in that history.

There are three things for us to take note of in this reading for our purposes, and that twofold goal of my father's course is the first one. As I never tire of pointing out, there are often important elements of our scripture readings each week that can easily pass us by if we don't look closely and get a little help, and the meaning of Moses and Elijah hanging out with Jesus on the mountaintop is one of those. So you need to know, if you don't already, that Moses was understood in ancient times to be the writer of the first five books of the Old Testament, and that Moses' name was often used as shorthand for those books, which were also known as the Torah – the teaching, or the law. That led to the expression "the law and the prophets" or "Moses and the prophets" as a way of speaking of all of Scripture. Everyone in Luke's original audience would have made this association. Here is Jesus, lit up like a Christmas tree, conversing with the entirety of the Scriptures, the law and the prophets.

And what are they talking about? They're talking about Jesus' "departure," and the Greek word for departure is "exodus," the word also used for the people of Israel's departure from slavery in Egypt. This is another connection that would have jumped out at Luke's audience. Jesus is preparing to lead his own Exodus, and he's conferring with the leader of the original Exodus. But then when God's voice speaks from the cloud and announces Jesus as God's son, Moses and Elijah disappear. Moses and Elijah will not be coming with Jesus on the road to his crucifixion, though they might show up again at his resurrection. Make a sticky not for your brain to watch out for two men in dazzling apparel on Easter Sunday. But for now, the "law and the prophets" have done their part in connecting Jesus to God's faithful and enduring promise to God's people. Jesus will take it from here, and things will be different this time.

The second thing to notice now is that this episode of God speaking from the cloud is very similar to Jesus' Baptism, where God also spoke from the cloud and confirmed Jesus' identity. "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." But this time, instead of speaking to Jesus, God addresses Jesus' disciples, who may not have been present at Jesus' baptism. And if they were, they weren't disciples yet, and we're not sure they heard what God said to Jesus, since it was addressed only to him. But we the readers and hears of Luke's Gospel did hear that, and we're meant to make the connection. Whether or not this is new information, the disciples know now, in no uncertain terms, who Jesus is. And the voice of God tells them to "listen to him." And that's because they are surely having trouble with that. Just before this episode in Luke, Jesus has told the disciples that he must now go to Jerusalem to be crucified,

and to rise from the dead. And they are called to "take up their crosses" to follow him – probably not what they thought they were signing up for when they were called from their fishing nets to become "fishers of people."

Third, Jesus' baptismal identity as the Son of God leads to what comes next. And unfortunately that may not have been so obvious in the way our lectionary readings are structured. Or maybe it is. There are good reasons for the way we have it. But what we didn't get back in January when we heard for the second time in this church year about Jesus' baptism, was what happened next. And what happened next was Jesus going out into the wilderness to do battle with the devil, to be tempted for forty days with all of the things we are tempted with in this life: wealth, power, security, and independence from God. But we do get that story next Sunday on the first Sunday in Lent. So we'll dig into that then. But notice the parallel here in today's reading. After the extraordinary events on the mountain top and the reminder of Jesus' baptismal identity, Jesus immediately is back to doing battle with sin, death, and evil when this boy is brought to him who is tormented by an evil spirit. And even if Jesus does not seem terribly happy about being back in the thick of that battle, he casts out the spirit and restores the boy to his father.

So what does this have to do with us, we modern day disciples of Jesus? I said at the outset that this episode in Jesus' earthly ministry provides us with a pattern for thinking about our lives of faith. And it tracks with those three things I wanted us to see in this reading. First, I want to suggest that every Sunday is a kind of transfiguration moment for us, where we get reconnected with the Scriptures, with "Moses and the prophets," as it were. Each week we are reminded of how God has been faithfully at work throughout history to save and redeem God's people and how all of that is connected with and focused on Jesus' death and resurrection, and we are invited each week to "listen to him!"

Second, when we gather around word and sacrament we are coming explicitly and intentionally into God's presence and reminded of *our* baptismal identity, so that God's words to Jesus at his baptism are now also God's words to us: "You are my child. You are mine and I love you." We belong to Christ, connected to him in Holy Baptism, fed at his table with his body to become his body in the world.

Third, just as in this story, we do not get to linger on the mountain top, as much as we might like to. The point of coming to church is not to hang out in church indefinitely, but to bring the gifts that church provides us into our daily lives. And so we are sent out into the world to do battle with sin, death, and evil, to do all of those difficult, impossible things that we have been challenged with lately, to recognize God's kingdom in the vulnerable people of the world, and in the peacemakers and those suffering for righteousness' sake, to love our neighbors as ourselves, even our neighbors who are our enemies. It is an endless battle, with constant demands we can never hope to meet. And we might get exasperated with that state of affairs, but maybe it helps to know that Jesus was exasperated too. And so we join the battle, trusting that what is impossible for us is not impossible for God, and that God is with us and for us in the struggle.

So here we go, sisters and brothers in Christ, down the mountain onto the plain of Lent, following our Lord through suffering and death to resurrection life that has already begun breaking into our troubled world. Take heart, for Jesus is with us on the journey and in the battle. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.