

**Transfiguration Sunday – February 15, 2026**  
Matthew 17:1-9

Pastor Chris Repp  
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

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

Two Sundays ago I relayed a story I had read in which a congregation member complained to their pastor about a sermon based on the Beatitudes, and when the pastor revealed that those were in fact Jesus' words, this person responded, "well, that just doesn't work anymore." My point then was that the Beatitudes have never "worked," but they do remain Jesus' words about what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, and at the same time show us how far we are in our current condition from God's goal for us. But there is also a temptation to use stories like that as "us-them" examples that show how some of our fellow Christians just don't get it, and to make ourselves feel better because we presumably do. A more honest take, though, would be to admit that we share that congregation member's skepticism about applying our Christian faith to our daily lives, even if most of us would never dare to be so outspoken about it. Because the truth is, living by faith is not easy. It has never been easy. And today's Transfiguration Gospel reading is meant to help us with that – not to make our life of faith easier, but to encourage us in the midst of its difficulty.

In order for us to catch that encouragement, though, we have to do a little work to place this story of Jesus and his disciples on the mountaintop, with Moses and Elijah and the voice of God, into its proper context. Our text is almost inviting us to do this work by the way it starts: "Six days later..." This episode takes place soon after a significant moment in the previous chapter, chapter 16, when Jesus asks his disciples what other people are saying about him. He then asks them their opinion. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter pipes up, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." And Jesus is amazed. "You must have been divinely inspired to say that." And then Jesus promises that he will build his church on that rock of faith. But then the story takes a more sober turn. Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to Jerusalem now, where he will be handed over and put to death, and then rise again. And Peter again speaks up, "God forbid it, this will never happen to you." But Jesus rebukes him, "get behind me Satan," he says, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And then he tells all of them that if they want to follow him, they will have to take up their own crosses.

This, then, is what happened six days earlier that sets the stage for today's reading. A moment of extraordinary faith followed by another moment of extraordinary resistance to Jesus' mission. Peter somehow knows that Jesus is the promised Messiah, but he soon reveals that his ideas about who the Messiah is are very much mistaken. This is the disciples' story from beginning to end, and it is ours as well. We are a mix, aren't we, of surprising faith and well-intentioned intransigence, of compassion and selfishness, of openness to God and our neighbor and of fearful defensiveness. We pray for God's help in our lives, but resist being led into a new way of living.

So now here they are on the mountaintop, presented with a vision of Moses and Elijah, the quintessential representatives of Israel's journey with God. Here are the Law and the Prophets, shorthand for the totality of God's covenantal faithfulness, and *they* are talking with Jesus. If there was any doubt up until this point about Jesus' identity as Messiah or his continuity with Israel's story, it is dispelled in this meeting of past and present. Now it is Jesus, not Moses, who shines with the glory of God. Moses and Elijah have done their work, and they are now passing the baton to Jesus to finish the race.

Peter speaks up again. Of course he does. God bless Peter for yet again saying what we're thinking. The glimpse of glory is mesmerizing. "This is the place to be! Hanging out as Jesus' inner circle up on the mountain, basking in the wonder of it all, confirmed in the faith we have confessed. Let's just stay here for a while, pitch some tents and settle in." It's so understandable, so relatable, isn't it? But it's also a subtle doubling down on the last time he spoke up. Because behind this pious sentiment is continued resistance to Jesus' mission. What Peter is really saying is, "let's stay here *instead* of going to Jerusalem."

But if Moses and Elijah are here passing the baton to Jesus, then this cannot be the finish line. It must be an exchange. And when you're running a relay race, you don't hang out at the exchanges. Helen and I used to run an 80-mile relay race every year down in Southern Illinois. There were eight people to a team, so 10 miles each, split up into three legs. While the runner was running, the rest of the team piled into the van and drove to the next exchange, and at the exchange the team would be there to cheer for the one coming in and to encourage the one beginning the next leg. You could think of the Transfiguration like that. Elijah is passing the baton to Jesus, and Moses is cheering them both on. But there is another here pulling for team Jesus, a voice from a cloud declaring "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." a proud parent, cheering his child on.

Then comes the response to Peter's alternate plan. "Listen to him" says the voice of God. And then the cloud and Moses and Elijah are gone, and the disciples see only Jesus. The exchange is over and the race is back on. Plan A is still in force. Jesus remains on course for Jerusalem, headed to his death and his resurrection. As crazy and counter intuitive as that plan seems, to the disciples and to us, that is still the plan. This the anchor leg in God's saving mission on behalf of all people that began back in the garden and continued through the ups and downs of Israel's story.

The Christian life of faith pulls us into this story and challenges us to trust that the way of the cross that Jesus travels and invites us to follow, the way of humility, compassion, and selfless love, the way of forgiveness, mercy, and hope in God's promised future, is the way of life worth living, the way of life that really is life. It is so because it is the way of Emmanuel, God with us in Jesus Christ. That doesn't make the way easy. Far from it. Like Peter and the rest of the disciples, we will have our good moments and our bad ones, times of extraordinary faith and trust in God's promises, and times of stubborn doubt and resistance that fall back on the false promises of this world that continually bombard us with their appeals to our fears, our insecurities, and our selfishness. But God will not let our bad days define us, or have the final word. God is with us in Jesus Christ through God's means of grace, God's word and sacraments, to encourage and sustain us on the journey, and assure us the it will not be in vain.

So as we prepare to descend the mountain of Transfiguration Sunday into the season of Lent, and as we seek to live faithfully through these unsettled times, let us be encouraged by the heavenly vision of God's glory and faithfulness made known to us in Jesus. May we cling to his promises, may our hearts be opened by his love, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.