

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of our Lord

It's unfortunate that many churches today have been designed for convenience instead of good theology. The goal is to be as "user friendly" as possible. And so often, even without realizing it, the modern design robs the worshiper of a richness of spirituality. The architecture, the stained glass, the symbols that have been tossed aside so that the person in the soft, cushioned pew feels right at home – these rich symbols can now no longer help create a sacredness to the House of God.

For example, many churches are now built at street level, which may assist those in wheel chairs, but what is missing is the sense of going up. For in worship we leave, for a time, the ordinariness of our everyday living and we ascend to the sacred mountain, to the Holy of Holies, to the place where God dwells. We are not at home here and we should not feel as though we are. We are in a special place. We are standing upon holy ground. We are not in our Lazy Boy with our T.V. clicker in hand. There is food here, but not ordinary food. The Bread of Life is given here through Word and Sacrament. There is much to drink here, but not the soda that we pull from our fridge. The Living Water is here, at the Font and flowing to us in His Word of Grace. We dress ourselves differently here, not to be impressive, but because God has impressed upon us that we are in the presence of the King of Kings.

We are here by invitation only. It is God who invites us. As Jesus led Peter, James, and John up the mountain, so He has led you up here to the place where His Glory dwells. And as He showed His divine majesty to them on the mountain, so here in His House, He lets us see His Glory. When your Pastor concludes the service with the words "May His Face shine upon you," that is not some wish, it is a reality. Here, at the Font, at His Table, in His Word of forgiveness; here we see the face of God and His face is shining with grace upon us. That's what He comes here to do. Not to burden you with a set of rules to keep, but to unburden you by releasing you from your sins.

That's why Moses and Elijah are here, just as they were on the mountain, so that these men, who spoke of Christ, may speak to us of Him who became our Lord. From the lectern when their words are read, we can only say, with Peter, "How good to be here." Here with Christ and His glorious grace; here with the saints who have gone on before us; here with the prophets and with all Christians of every time and place.

Peter didn't necessarily want to stay up on that mountain. His desire was to be always a part of the *Una Sancta* – the one true Church, which gathers around Jesus Christ, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Himself being the cornerstone. And that true Church is here. For where Christ is, there are His saints. Christ is here in Word and Sacrament. His prophets are here, read to us every Sunday. Peter, James, and John are here. These men who became apostles, who witness to us by their inspired words, that Jesus is our crucified and risen Savior.

It's not just an unfortunate thing that many modern church buildings are designed wrong. Today also, unfortunately, we have modernized our thinking, as well, so that we have lost the fear of God. When He spoke to Peter, James, and John on the mountain, they fell on

their faces to the ground. They did not dare to look up. When we enter God's presence here, as we do with the words of Invocation, and then as we, like them, bow our heads to confess our sins, where are our thoughts? Where are our eyes? Are we trembling with Peter, James, and John before the Holy God, or are we looking around at our neighbors and thinking about last night's activities?

The same God who spoke on that mountain is here with us. Who do we think we are? Too good to fall down on our faces before Him? Too righteous to be judged by Him? We stand condemned in our sinfulness. We are nothing before Him. We have wrapped ourselves in the T-shirt worn by so many teens today – "No Fear!" But those with no fear will be judged. God preserve us from that. Let us fall down in fear with Peter, James, and John confessing our sins.

And in doing so, it was Jesus who came to them. "Arise," He said, "do not be afraid." Friend, that same Word Jesus speaks to you today. Through His pastor in the Word of Absolution, He says, arise, get off the ground, be not afraid, you are forgiven.

We cannot rise up out of our sins; Jesus lifts us out of them. We cannot remove the fear of punishment, Jesus takes away that fear – He was punished for us in our place. We cannot escape the troubles of our life; Jesus gives us a way through them.

He knew that His disciples were trembling on the mountain, so He came to them and touched them. He knows your fears, your sins, your troubles. You cannot go to Him; He comes to you and touches you with His grace and love. He touched you at the Font with the water and the Word. He touched you there, lifting you out of Satan's kingdom, to make you His own child. He touches you at His Table with His Body and Blood, to stand you firm in His grace; to give you the nourishment you need for this journey through life. He touches you with His Word of pardon; a Word that gives forgiveness and faith. A Word that carries you to His cross and says I died there for you. "It is finished." Your place in heaven with Me is secure.

Dare we leave this place? Dare we travel back down the mountain into our ordinary, everyday life? Yes, for we have been strengthened here. We have seen God's face and it is shining with grace upon us. We have received His forgiveness. But as we leave, He goes with us to keep us in His care and to lead us again back here to His Holy Mountain. So that week after week, we continue to see, as Peter, James, and John did, the face of Jesus, and only Jesus.

Amen.