Transfiguration Sunday, March 3: Luke 9:28–36

Other Lessons: Deuteronomy 34:1–12; Psalm 99; Hebrews 3:1–6

Transfiguration Sunday serves as a bridge that helps us transition from the season of Epiphany into Lent. After celebrating Christmas, the church spends time in the season of Epiphany to slowly unpack and unwrap this gift from above. And knowing rightly who and what Jesus was born to do, the right response of faith then is repentance, which is what Lent is for. Jesus was born to die for us, that we too may die with him and be raised to newness of life. This is the Christian life. And today once again we get a glimpse of who he truly is, the beloved son of God, and together with Peter, James, and John we may find strength in the cross of Jesus.

Here Luke tells us that this happened 8 days after, but after what? It was Peter’s confession of Christ and ironically, also his denial of the Christ, his death and resurrection. This is when Jesus actually called Peter “Satan” (but this detail is only found in Matthew). Jesus foretells his death in Jerusalem AND be raised on the third day. But Peter would not allow it. If Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God as he boldly confessed, then he doesn’t need to suffer, he doesn’t have to die, what’s the point of dying and rising again? Why not just come to Jerusalem to reclaim his kingdom in all his power and glory?

And so now on this mountain, Jesus’ glory shines forth through his whole body. Luke describes Jesus’ face is changed and his garment was extra-dazzling white, this is to make a distinction to another 8th day event, where also 2 men appeared in the tomb with garments dazzling white (*astrapto*), but Jesus here is described as “extra” dazzling (*exastrapto*). With such great majesty and glory, even with 2 great heroes of the Old Testament, who here represents the Law and the Prophets, can anything go wrong? But perhaps what is troubling them is the content of the conversation that they overhead. Only Luke records this detail, that they were discussing Jesus’ departure, or in the original Greek, literally his “exodus” in Jerusalem. No doubt, what they are referring is Jesus’ death and resurrection, because that is what he came to do. This is the whole point of the Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Testament is to prepare people for that event. But that was not what Peter wanted.

And so Peter finds comfort and assurance on this mountain, away from sorrow and pain and suffering and thus he says, “it is good for us to be here.” The text here according to Luke seems as if Peter tried to delay and prolong this wonderful time by saying what he said. He wanted to build either a booth or a tabernacle for each of those 3 men. Certainly, it is unlikely that Peter thought Moses and Elijah were equal to Jesus (though honored enough to have a booth). The text even says that he did not know what he was saying, probably still half dreaming. Nevertheless, he did not want them to depart because this is “good” according to his flesh, according to his will, according to the things of this world.

Unfortunately, we are no different from Peter for all we care about is ourselves, our needs, our flesh. All we think about is how to live with the greatest benefit for our sinful desires of selfishness and loving and protecting ourselves and our goods. There is indeed nothing wrong in enjoying life, to a certain degree, but what happens when things don’t go as we want them to be? What becomes of our attitude? Do we take Jesus aside and rebuke him like Peter? telling him that he has it wrong, that our lives should be this way or that way? And when things go well, do we say to Jesus, “it is good this way, let us stay like this forever”? What do we actually mean when we ask “thy will be done”?

Is it really “good” to be there, for Peter, James, John, and us? Is it “good” to be where we are comfortable and happy? Peter was probably thinking about the earthly and fleshly comfort when he rejected Jesus purpose in Jerusalem, but there is a spiritual dimension that we cannot ignore. The false spiritual comfort and peace is when one thinks nothing of sin and repentance and faith. It is “good” to ignore the pains and discomfort of our sins, but that is death. And sometimes engulfing ourselves with our desires may help us forget this problem, but only for a little while.

We see that with those 3 guys. As soon as the cloud overshadowed them and enveloped them, they were filled with fear. The presence of God is terrifying. When a sinner is confronted by the most holy God, they can only hide and shun away because the conscience can no longer escape (we saw this in the great catch of fish). The true glory of God is exactly his righteousness, which condemns all unrighteousness.

But the good news is that Jesus did not stay in his shining and glorious form, he did not come to fully display his righteousness so as to condemn unrighteousness and put all mankind to shame and eternal death, nor was he hindered by Peter’s good (albeit selfish) intentions, because he came for that one purpose in Jerusalem, to suffer and die and be raised again for us. He had to leave that mountain because it was on another mountain that his true glory was fully displayed, not with the radiance of his face or the dazzling garments, nothing extraordinary like that, but his glory was in his blood, a tortured body, and nakedness exposed for all to see. Would anyone consider that glorious? Those who were there did not, they mocked him, they spat at him. All they saw was shame, a sinner dying at the hands of pagan soldiers, a sinner judged by his own God.

True glory is not found in the externals, in the things that we see, feel, or sense, but in what God declares to be glorious. The glory of God is fully displayed in Jesus not only because he is the beloved son but because he was chosen to accomplish what Moses, Elijah, and all the prophets, with the rest of the Old Testament had prophesied and longed for, the salvation of the world. To those without faith, Jesus was just another heretic deserving death, but seeing with eyes of faith, the cross and the empty tomb means victory over death, the power of sin was disarmed, and the forgiveness of sins is assured.

That mountain is the real “good” place to be, that’s why we call that day “Good Friday”. But Jesus does not stay there either, he came down from the cross and he has come out of the grave. Just like the 2 men here on this mountain talking about his departure (exodus, coming out), so also the 2 angels told the women on that Sunday morning, “he is not here”, that is, he has departed, come out victorious, death cannot bind him forever. So then where is the “good” place to be? Is it here in the church? and only on Sundays? No! the good place is in where Jesus promised to be. The glorious lord, son of God, the one who overcomes death and sin is with us. “Good” is no longer defined by a place or people or anything that is found in this world, but it is defined by the person of Jesus.

Therefore in faith, we too can say “it is good for us to be here” but not in the things of man, but rather in the things that God has placed before us, yes, even in suffering, pain, difficult situations, and whatever else we may face because we know Jesus IS where we are, he is always with us as he has promised. And this is the strength we need, that seeing all his glory, both at his transfiguration and his cross, we too may bear our crosses and follow him. Seeing his power AND love, we have the strength to repent and cling to the life that comes from his cross for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It is his cross because he is with us.

So learn to repent because that is the highest good for you and the first step in doing this is to examine oneself according to the law of God (usually the 10 commandments are a good standard). As we now enter Lent, which is a penitential season in the church, it is a good time to take out your small catechism again and read through Luther’s explanation of the commandments. Also read the “table of duties” in the small catechism because those are the practical applications of the commandments. Another thing to consider is to attend the mid-week services. God is giving us an extra opportunity to hear his word that we may hear, repent, and believe. Yes, it’s “extra” work, but it is a way of subduing the flesh. It is God’s way of answering our prayer of “thy will be done”.

From Christmas to epiphany we have seen the light, but what does it mean for us? Is it not for us to repent and believe? Is it not for us to cling to Christ and his word because it is life? So then we join Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John, and all those who have seen the great glory and majesty of our lord. We join them in the life of Christ and his cross.