

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN

Exodus 34:29-35; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up onto the mountain, I'm sure they weren't quite prepared for what they witnessed. Only a few people had seen Christ in His Divine glory before: Moses had seen Him, and when he came down from the mountain the skin of his face shown with the reflection of that glory. The people of Israel had seen His glory from afar at the same time too, shining on the top of the mountain, like a consuming fire, we are told in Exodus. The prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah saw His glory in a vision. Elijah the great prophet of the Old Testament covered His face in the presence of the Lord and so did not see. But now Peter, James and John see their friend and master transfigured before their very eyes. His clothing is made to shine like white light and His face is beaming as bright as the sun. And with Him appear Moses and Elijah, patriarchal saints long dead, yet alive with God in heaven; and these holy men speak with Jesus. According to St. Luke's Gospel they talk with Him about the salvation He was soon to accomplish in Jerusalem by dying on behalf of all men and rising again. And then to top the whole scene off, the voice of God the Father rings out of the glory cloud identifying Jesus as His own beloved Son.

From this miracle we learn many things. We see the Divinity of Jesus very clearly by this miracle, and yet we see that He is also still a man, for when the miraculous event is past, there He stands in His flesh as they had always known Him. Yes, here is God's own Divine Son, very God of very God, begotten, not made, as we confess in the creed, and when they look to see the Divine Son they see no one but Jesus only.

We also learn about the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture from this miracle. St. Peter makes the point that the Transfiguration event proved the faithfulness of the Old Testament Scriptures to the apostles and to the church, for these Scriptures pointed forward to the coming of Christ, the Divine Son of God. And now He has been revealed and has fulfilled them. And so Peter rightly tells us to heed these Scriptures, for they are God's own Word.

Moreover, we also see here, what the point of all Scripture is. At the heart of all of the Scriptures is Christ Jesus, but not just Jesus as God, or even as God and man, but Jesus as Savior, the Savior who dies and rises for us. This is the thing that the prophets are most interested in on the Transfiguration Mount. This is the heart of the Faith and of the Scriptures themselves. And this is what the evangelists and apostles proclaim in their Gospels and Epistles. What St. Paul says could be said by any of these holy men: "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2).

But the thing I want to focus our attention upon today is the little picture of Heaven that we have in this miracle; for that is surely what the disciples experienced that day, a glimpse of Heaven itself. There at the center of everything is Jesus the Son of God shining with Divine glory. And He is surrounded by His saints of old, the faithful who have entered into paradise with Him and who glorify Him for His salvation. But they are not alone. They are joined by the holy men and saints of the New Testament Church as well who also adore Him, falling down before Him in worship and awe. And through Christ, these experience the presence and grace of God the Father, who points them again to Christ and says: "Hear Him" who is the Word of God incarnate, the Spokesman of the Holy Trinity to all creation.



Of course, those New Testament saints, Peter, James and John, did not quite understand what they were seeing at the time. Oh, they knew that they were experiencing a heavenly thing! In fact Peter knows it so well that he proposes to set up camp there, to build tabernacles for Jesus and the saints that they might continue there, perhaps to establish worship there as in the tabernacle of old, or perhaps just so that Peter and his friends will not have to forsake this heaven in which they have now found themselves. Peter had rightly said that it was good for them to be there. And he did not want the experience, wonder, and bliss of Christ's glory to end. But at this point God the Father breaks in and speaks. He interrupts Peter's wrong-headed ideas. And says quite simply that they must listen to Jesus: "This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased. Hear Him".

Of course Peter (and we might presume the others too) wanted to stay on the mountain. They wanted to stay in the place that had become Heaven on Earth. But they couldn't. And when they look up after God the Father has spoken the event has come to an end. And there stands Jesus alone before them, His Divinity safely hidden away again. They couldn't stay, you see, because there was work to be done. Christ had His glorious work of salvation to accomplish still. He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer and die in order that He might conquer sin and death and rise again. If this work had not been done, if they had stayed on that mountain as Peter had proposed, then Christ's coming and deeds would have all been in vain. His work had to be done.

And the disciples too had work to do. First they had more to learn. They needed to hear Jesus, as God the Father had said. And they had the sad and faith-shattering work of also enduring His suffering and death as witnesses of it. And after the resurrection and their return to faith, they had the great work of proclaiming Him and His Gospel throughout the world. And finally they had the work of suffering after the pattern of Christ and dying themselves. And why could they not just skip all of that and be translated into Heaven at once? Because their work was for the good of others, of their neighbors, and of the whole world. It was a work for your good and mine, that we might come to know Christ and join them in confession of His name and in His gift of salvation; that we, like little Paul, might be baptized and believe and thereby be saved. All of this must be done before they could enter into Heaven permanently and enjoy forever what they had glimpsed on the Transfiguration Mount.

We get little glimpses of Heaven ourselves as Christians. No, Jesus does not come down and dazzle us with His Divine Glory. And we have not had visions of patriarchs and saints long dead (well, at least, I highly doubt you have). And God the Father has certainly never spoken directly out of Heaven to any one of us. But in the Divine Service we do get a glimpse of Heaven by faith. Here, every week, Christ comes to us in His flesh and blood to save and nourish His people. And here He is testified to by Moses and Elijah and the rest of the prophets through the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures. Here He is proclaimed by Peter and John and the other apostles and evangelists when the New Testament Scriptures are read. And here His Gospel, His death and resurrection for your salvation, is preached. And all of this is a shining forth of His glory to you, the glory of His salvation. And when these things are given you, you are for the moment in Heaven while yet on earth. Though the eyes cannot see it, it is true. For wherever Christ Jesus is, there is Heaven. And so when He comes to you by means of Word and Sacrament, you experience a glimpse of Heaven. The ancient liturgy of the Church captures this truth when at communion we pray: "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Your glorious name, etc." And most importantly, in the Divine Service, you get to hear Jesus, just as God the Father instructed Peter, James and John to do. And in hearing Him, you receive everything you need for your Christian faith and for your Christian life.

Some have so come to understand the heavenly reality of the Divine Service that they long to dwell in it longer and more often. Why not have communion every day, every hour, continually even?! It is good to be here, so why not pitch our tents here and stay?

Others would prefer to skip right to the end and go to Heaven permanently. Why settle for glimpses of Heaven when the full experience could be had if this life were to end! Indeed the pious faithful have long prayed: "Come, Lord Jesus" with this very purpose in mind. So why must we continue in this life with its routines, disappointments, trials, and suffering? Why doesn't God just translate us into Heaven right away?

The answer to both questions is the same. You still have work to do. Just like the apostles, God does not want for you to stay on the Mount perpetually, but to descend again and live as He has given you to do. You have the desire to experience all of Heaven right now? It's a fine desire, but do not let it remove you from the work and life God has given you to do and live now. St. Paul had the same desire! He writes to the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better..." And yet he continued on in this life, saying: "Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith..."

Just as Paul had work that remained to be done, work for the good of others; so also you have work to be done in your life. And the work is not an end in itself, as view work, but is given you that you might serve those around you. In this you are God's own instrument, His hands so to speak, to do good for your neighbors. Now your work may not be quite the same as that of Peter or James or John or Paul, or of my own, or of Craig's or of Mary's, or of Oliver's or of Paul's, or anyone else's. Each of us has our own callings in life, but each of those callings has at least one or two things in common. Each is an opportunity to do good to our neighbor in this life. And each calling also has opportunities to confess the grace and glory of Christ to our neighbors that they

might have hope in the life to come. You see the world still needs Christians in it. It needs your works both great and small. And it needs the humility, the love and the compassion that true faith alone can give.

Jesus gave His disciples the miracle of the Transfiguration that they might be strengthened for the thing they would have to endure and for the work they would be called to do. He gives us the Divine Service, a glimpse of Heaven in our own time, for the same purpose. Through His Gospel He speaks to us that we may hear Him and receive the faith and strength of it necessary to live in faith and in love and in hope. And through His Sacrament, especially, He gives us a little foretaste of that hope, a foretaste that itself strengthens hope. Thanks be to Christ for His glory, the glory of His Gospel and of our salvation. And may He keep us faithful unto the day when we shall see His shining face in Heaven forever. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧