

THE WORD FROM ABOVE CALLS YOU TO HEAR JESUS

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Hear today's theme passage chosen from Word of the Lord for this Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord:

Then, (while) he was continuing to speak, behold, (a) shining cloud overshadowed them; and, behold, (a) Voice out of the cloud saying, "This One remains My Son, the Beloved, in Whom I (am) well pleased. All of you must continue to hear Him!"¹

Four weeks ago, you who are regular in hearing the Word of God in this place, or from this place via the Internet, heard words similar to those at the end of this Sunday's theme verse. During the Lord's services commemorating the Baptism of our Lord, we were reminded that Jesus and John had both heard (a) *Voice from the heavens saying, "This One remains My Son, the Beloved in Whom I am well pleased."*²

That means that this is yet another day to remember that the Church, from eyewitness testimonies, has been given God's confession about Himself in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is that wonderful truth that the Church Year ties together for us. Those two divine proclamations in a season that celebrates the appearance of God-in-our-flesh have been joined and heard in Christian Churches since the late 300s AD.

There may also have been such pairings of readings about Jesus' Baptism and His Transfiguration in the three centuries after Jesus' first Epiphany. But, after some 300 years of persecutions against Christians, the Church, and her recorded writings, such have been virtually impossible to find. If the Lord's permissive will allows persecutions to rise against the Church in our day, in our land, it may well be that 20 centuries from now, any believers remaining will wonder what we had recorded that had been burned, shredded or wiped from "the cloud" (as in internet cloud computing).

That is one reason why, in congregations like this one, we emphasize that you, the faithful, continue to hear the Word. Recorded material can be, and has been, destroyed

¹ *Matthew 17:5.*

² *Matthew 3:17.*

by those who have willed to bring down Christ's Church. Think about this reality: the Gospel records for today were drawn by Holy inspiration from the minds of men – Matthew, Mark/Peter, and Luke – writing of events up to decades after they had transpired. The Holy Spirit has proven that He can take that which is stored in the minds of the faithful and transform it, decades, and even generations after, into that which can again be handed on to future generations.

Consider this true 20th century A.D. occurrence that reveals the Holy Spirit working through God's memorized Word to lead others to saving knowledge and the good confession of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of the hearers' sins. In the time of the Iran/Iraq war, a Kurdish soldier, as well as a Deacon in the Assyrian Christian Church, Daniel, was taken captive by the Iranians. While in prison – for something like eight years – his Muslim captors forbid him any Christian writings. He had no Bible, no hymnal, nothing but that which he had learned of the Faith by heart. That Word, planted deep in him by the liturgical chants of the lectionary of the Assyrian church, rose up in him regularly. God used the deeply implanted Word of the "rote" services of the Church over the years, as it came forth from Deacon Daniel, to lead some thirty fellow Muslim captives to confess the Christ – Jesus of the Christian Scriptures – to be their Lord and Savior. That man later chose to attend the Lutheran services in Iraq because of that Word. He became a baptismal sponsor to a man who still calls this congregation his home. Deacon Dan lived and breathed the treasures of the revealed Word that God gives through His liturgy and lectionary. That Word worked through Him as He chanted it to others. Will you have to do something similar someday?

We know not, but we do know that God, every year at this time, calls each and all of us, from the very first disciples of Jesus, to continue to hear Him! That exhortation has been handed down to us today, giving us, giving you, the Lord's call and commission. This we hear through our theme verse for this year:

Then, (while) he was continuing to speak, behold, (a) shining cloud overshadowed them; and, behold, (a) Voice out of the cloud saying, "This One remains My Son, the Beloved, in Whom I (am) well pleased. All of you must continue to hear Him!"³

As the Word for today makes clear, we are to "Behold!" in hearing such revelations of Jesus as the incarnate Word, that it is He to Whom all God's children are to hearken. In other Words, today, again you hear of the Word from above that calls you to continue to hear Jesus! Three men, four if you count Mark as a writer of Peter's record in his Gospel, give us eye and ear witness records of these Epiphany-tide events, God-breathed into them that they might come out of them at the proper time. Then, through centuries of persecution, that same Holy Spirit preserved their record of the Word that it might go forth after the Church had been fertilized with the flesh and blood of martyrs.

All of that opened for us today in the record of the former tax collector, one who, by his name, was of the tribe of Levi. That fact, in itself, could be the source of another complete sermon. That a man whose birthright was to attend to the Holy Things of God could be employed handling money with unholy images could be turned again by hearing Jesus to attending to the Holy Things of God is another sign of divine grace. That is good news for us sinners who have handled all manner of unholy things. If Matthew could be saved by hearing, and following, Jesus, so can we be saved through hearing and following Jesus! The One whose Word turned the unclean (and likely cheating tax collector), can turn us from our uncleannesses too! Our text concerning "*This One [Who] remains [God's] Son, the Beloved, in Whom [He] (is) well pleased...*" began like this in our hearing:

Then, after six days, Jesus continued to take alongside the Peter and James and John the brother of him, and He continued to lead them up into (a) high mountain, privately.⁴

³ Matthew 17:5.

⁴ Matthew 17:1.

The first line leads to this question: after six days of what? Well, from all three evangelists, the “what” was revealed in Jesus’ teachings that follow Peter’s confession about Jesus, namely, that He is the Christ of God. The closest teachings to today’s text concerned Jesus’ announcement of His coming death and resurrection; His call to His disciples to take up their crosses and follow Him; and, very significantly, that there were those hearing Him teach who would not taste death until they beheld the kingdom of God! That neatly ties together with today’s text’s revelation about that which Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were discussing on the holy mountain at Jesus’ transfiguration (more about that in a bit).

For now, at least two to six of you may be thinking, what holy mountain is that on which all this took place long ago. The short answer is, the Bible does not definitively say in these texts which mountain. So, we cannot bind consciences to a particular mountain as being “The Mount of Transfiguration.” The long answer is that at least four mountains may be the one which theologians have pointed their students to over the centuries since the Transfiguration of our Lord. That is enough on that subject today! Our text continues:

Then [Jesus] was metamorphosized before them, and His Face shone as the sun, and His garments became white as the light. ⁵

Talk about, “Shine, Jesus Shine!,” as the old so-called contemporary ditty declared! The text indicates that He was absolutely – beautifully – glowing. The Son, the incarnation of the Second eternal Person of the Holy Trinity, was being revealed to the three human witnesses as the God Who dwells in inaccessible light. Have you ever considered how wonderful it would have been to have been there on that unnamed holy mountain and behold Jesus transformed into the full light of His divine glory? How awesome would that have been? But... you have been touched by Jesus, you have had your sins washed away through the hearing of His Word in holy baptism, and you have not had to wait for such glowing images as the disciples once did! Think about what that

⁵ Matthew 17:2.

has done for you, even today, as you participate in the highest service and worship of the Gospel. That is, *you receive good things from God!... The highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness.*⁶ Our text continues:

*Then, behold, appeared to them Moses and Elijah speaking together with Him.*⁷

How did Peter and James and John know those with whom Jesus was speaking were Moses and Elijah? The answer must be through the Holy Spirit working through the Word they had heard. They would not have had any pictures of Moses and Elijah—graven images were forbidden under the First Commandment of the Old Covenant decalogue. Yet, they would have heard, as faithful Israelites, of Moses' face glowing as he came down from the Mountain of the Covenant, and of Elijah being taken up into heaven with the divine chariots of fire. They would have known that God Himself buried the body of Moses, and that Elijah had been assumed bodily apart from death into the eternal Presence of the One Who dwells in inaccessible light. The Holy Spirit opened their minds to the wonders before them. He called them to that highest worship of the Good News of God—the forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness. And, what did Peter, the one upon whose confession Christ would build His Church, what did Peter offer? He wanted to keep them in that place! He again was attempting to keep Jesus from the cross, as our text declares he exclaimed:

*Lord, (how) beautiful it is for us to be here! If You will, I will make here three tents (tabernacles), one for You, for Moses one, and for Elijah one.*⁸

Is the highest worship of the Gospel that which Peter offered that day long ago? Think about what he was offering to do. He was so impressed at that which He was seeing that he missed that which he was hearing! Remember, dear hearers of the Word, that another evangelist, Luke, gives us more details about the Transfiguration of our

⁶ Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (p. 155). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

⁷ *Matthew* 17:3.

⁸ *Matthew* 17:4.

Lord. The Word we hear through his Gospel informs us that Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah were discussing Jesus' coming exodus – His death in the sins of the whole world that was to come soon in Jerusalem. I mean, earlier you heard that Jesus' foretelling His death and resurrection were part of that which He had been teaching, and Peter and the others had heard, just six days before. You remember everything that you heard in last week's sermon, especially the parts you didn't like to hear, right? Repent!

You see Peter and the other disciples are like you, like us. They quickly forgot the hard things of the Lord's teaching. That is why the Church long ago put important parts of those hard sayings in the form of Church orders we call liturgies and in the Church calendar. Thank the Lord for the faithfulness of the early and middle Church fathers, and for the reformers who returned the Church's services to the centrality of the highest worship of the Gospel – the forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness.

Oh, that does not mean that the Church, in each generation, has not had those in her who wish to do as Peter did long ago. That is, to hold onto the glowing glorious Jesus without the cross. One does not have to travel far, even in Lutheranism, from this place, to find church buildings where the images of the crucified One are eschewed, and the cross of Christ is obscured by teachings emphasizing people's bearing their own crosses as they work out their sanctification, or worse yet, their salvation! Beware of the Jesus your old Adam desires. What does Scripture reveal about God's response to that type of Peter-thinking over and against crucifixion and resurrection thinking? That is answered in today's theme verse.

What then is the reaction of the three men to God's call to hear Jesus, the One Who would be crucified?

Then, having heard, the disciples fell upon their faces, and they feared greatly.⁹

⁹ Matthew 17:6

They realized the glowing Jesus was truly the true and perfect reflection of the Presence of the Living God as the Cloud of the Presence enveloped them. They fell, as did the ancient fathers of the Faith on another holy mountain, as a prophet (Daniel) did when receiving visions of things to come – the fell to the dust from which God had formed man. They, aware of their fallen state, seem to desire to crawl back to that which existed before God had molded man in His own image.

That would be your reaction today if Jesus, in unveiled glory, were to return on the clouds. You would drop to the position of worship. And, because you have been given Jesus' glorious Faith, you would, as you will someday should you have slept in the dust of the earth before His return, you will make the good confession of the Faith – Jesus Christ is Lord. And, rejoice!

Until that day, remember, that as Jesus touched the disciples of old and bid them arise from the humility of their sinful states, as the Angel of the Lord once touched the prophets and bid them arise, Jesus comes and touches you. Most of you experienced His first touch with the Water and the Word. Some of us first felt His touch with the hand on our heads as the Word of His forgiveness was declared to us. Many of us experience His touch with the elements He chose – where He comes with the Bread and Wine. Hear what He said to Peter, James, and John, and own it anew for yourself:

*Jesus, coming alongside, then having touched them, He said, "All of you be risen! And, do not all of you be afraid!"*¹⁰

As you rise from this table today, you will be free to go forth without fear. You will be able to depart from this holy hill, to go down with the Lord's message of His glory. Unlike Peter, James, and John, you will not have to wait to tell others of that which God has done today, for Jesus has been raised from the dead. His victory over sin, death, and the devil is yours to share! For:

we have more certain the prophetic word, of which (it is) good to continually hold the mind to, as (a) lamp shining in (a) murky place, until

¹⁰ Matthew 17:8.

*when(the) day shines through and (the) morning star rises in the hearts of
all of you...¹¹*

You have Jesus' glory revealed in His Word.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Transfiguration (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)
Psalm 2; Exodus 34:29-35; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

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Soli Deo Gloria

¹¹ II Peter 1:19.