

*Texts: Matthew 16:24-17:8*

*Subject: The Transfiguration*

*Theme: From the Mountain to the Margins*

*Transfiguration Sunday; March 3, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

Have you had those moments of experiencing God's glory? Were you on a mountaintop or out in nature somewhere? Have you seen glimpses of the Kingdom or heard God's call to ministry? The story of the Transfiguration sounds like something right out of a movie. It's dramatic.

When I was younger, I didn't think much about experiencing God's presence, or listening for Jesus' call to serve, or how to see the Kingdom of God. I wanted to figure out my role. Where do I belong? I would learn about serving my neighbors through scouting, first with my mother leading our Cub Scout troop, we'd serve in our community, participate in beach clean ups, or other service events. As I got older I'd earn merit badges, by studying what it meant to be a good citizen. On campouts, I'd practice care for the environment, by leaving a place better than when we'd found it. But this stuff wasn't new to me. As the oldest child in my family, it was my job to care for the little ones. *That was my role.* I didn't really have a choice. When mom and dad were working or just having a rare night out of the house, I was the diaper changer, the babysitter, the meal preparer, and the entertainer too. That meant I had to be attentive. I had to see the need and take care of it. We had french doors that opened up to a backyard filled with pine trees, which means a yard littered with pine cones to step on. There were palm trees that made nice homes for coral snakes. There was a rusty swing set

and a trampoline just asking for trouble. I had to be on my guard. I'm sure there were times when I wasn't paying attention and somebody got hurt.

I was just a kid too. I was learning how to fulfill this role of older brother, responsible son, and caretaker. I didn't have all the answers, and I wasn't perfect. I'm still not. I remember the first time Lily pinched herself on a TV tray I'd left setup in our living room, I felt that pain so deeply. Kids get hurt, we learn from our mistakes, we suffer too.

Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom of heaven, and God's concern for those who are poor, hungry, sick, and in need. In His life and ministry Jesus taught with stories and lead by example. To the poor he gave hope. To the hungry, He gave food. To the sick he brought healing. Their roles were given to them. They didn't have a lot of options, and likely were just trying to survive. After discussing it with the disciples, he begins to teach them about what is to come, the passion, the cross, the resurrection. They don't get it. They were like kids too, who couldn't fully understand. But as the story begins to move move toward Jerusalem, they have an encounter to awakens them to this powerful presence among them.

*On the mountain, a man bent in prayer erupts in sudden light. As glory leaks from every pore, three sleepy disciples cower in the grass and watch their Master glow. Two figures appear out of time and space; in solemn tones they speak of exodus, accomplishment, Jerusalem. The disciples, comprehending nothing, babble nonsense in response — "Let's make tents! Let's stay here always! This is good!" A cloud descends, thick and impenetrable. As it envelops the disciples, they fall to their faces, certain the end has come. But a Voice addresses them instead, tender and gentle. "This is my Son, my Chosen." The Voice hums with delight, and the disciples, braver now, look up. They gaze at their Master — the Shining One — and a Father's pure joy sings with the stars. "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him."*

This dramatic reading comes from a lectionary essay from Debie Thomas. Her insights give vivid detail to this event known as the Transfiguration. Jesus goes up the mountain. He goes to a high place, like he did when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, like when He taught the great crowds, like when He helped feed thousands of people. There with Him are Moses and Elijah - maybe representing the law and the prophets. These two are *also* ones that tradition told would return just before the appearance of the Messiah - the chosen one of God that would free God's people from oppression and defeat the powers of the worldly empires. Yet even out there in the wilderness with Moses the people strayed from the law. Over time, stubborn people wouldn't listen to the words of the prophets. Now, they still struggle to understand that with their teacher was the fullness of God.

We're more than halfway through Matthew's telling of the good news and Jesus has already demonstrated the reality of the nearness of the Kingdom. He told people who were most the powerless, poor, and persecuted about God's very specific love for them. He met marginalized people with a message of *radical inclusion* in a culture and context that saw them as insignificant others, sinners, deserving of the lower status they experienced in life. He called them, walked with them, saw them and listened to them, spent time with them, and served them with his own hands. He healed sickness for many, and bore witness to God's *unbounded* love and grace.

Peter got the right answer when asked "Who do you say that I am, but he couldn't comprehend the implications - he wasn't ready to give up his own life. A dying Messiah wasn't the one he was expecting. Even when the light is brightest, and Jesus face shone like the sun, Peter wanted to be in control. He recognized there was

something Holy among them - "Let's make tents!" Like in the wilderness, they tabernacled with God who was present through the giving of the law. Peter's response is to do what is needed, *he's dutiful, yet doesn't fully understand what is to happen next.*

*Again, from Debie Thomas:*

*In the valley, a boy writhes in the dust. He drools, he cannot hear, and his eyes — wide-open, feral — sees nothing but darkness. Around him a crowd gathers and swells, eager for spectacle. Scribes jeer, and disciples wring their hands in shame. "Frauds!" someone yells into the night. "Charlatans!" "Where's your Master?" the scribes ask the disciples an umpteenth time. "Why has he left you?" "We don't know," the disciples mutter, gesturing vaguely at the mountain. Panic wars with exhaustion as they hear the boy shriek yet again — an echo straight from hell. He flails, and his limbs assault his stricken face. A voice — strangled, singular — rends the night. "This is my son!" a man cries out as he pushes through the crowd to gather the convulsing boy into his arms. Everyone stares as the father cradles the wreck of a child against his chest. "Please," he sobs to the stars. "Please. This is my beloved son. Listen to him."*

Jesus goes to the place where He is needed most. He doesn't bask in the light for his own glory but gives His own life for the well being of the creation. For you. For us. For all. Jesus says to the disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." To follow Jesus is not to live for ourselves alone, but to be called into the world to be bearer's of the light of Christ. We call it here "sharing the heart of Christ in the heart of the city." To follow Jesus is to often struggle in our journeys, but to always know the road leads to Jerusalem - to the cross where the one whom God sends to be light in our darkness is lifted up in suffering, in a painful death to bear the wounds of our failures and selfishness, to heal what we cannot, to serve those we forgot, and to bring life where we thought it could not possibly exist. We can't control God - we don't build tents to contain the life-giving and

powerful presence of the Holy Spirit still moving in the world and in us. We can only look to the cross to see how God's radical love has been gifted to us, listen to that life-giving Word that has been given to us, and feel the forgiveness that frees us to go and live not for ourselves but for the sake of our neighbors, to give up our lives to find them again, and to live in the example of our Lord, who moved from the mountaintop to the margins to free the world from sin and death and who still brings hope for a future filled with radiant light.

A prayer of Saint Francis:

May God bless us with discomfort

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships

So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger

At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations

So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears

To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,

So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and

To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness

To believe that we can make a difference in the world,

So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:

To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbors who are poor.

Amen.