

“Glory for the Way of the Cross”

Matthew 17:1-9

Let us pray: God of truth, shine the light of your word upon us today, that we may see your radiant face and hear your voice. Renew us, that we may follow you faithfully. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, today's passage is the familiar story of the Transfiguration. But this text is not given simply to show us a mysterious experience or a breathtaking scene. Its meaning becomes clear when we ask when, why, and to whom it was given.

Matthew 17 does not stand on its own. In the previous chapter, Matthew 16, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead. Then he says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24, NIV).

The disciples did not understand these words. Peter, in particular, took Jesus aside and said, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (Matthew 16:22). Immediately after this exchange, today's passage follows. Jesus spoke first about the cross, but the disciples were not ready to receive that word. So God shows them glory next. This glory does not erase the cross. Rather, it reveals that the cross itself is God's way.

The passage begins, “After six days Jesus took with him...” (Matthew 17:1). Matthew tells us that the Transfiguration happened “after six days.” Luke, describing the same event, writes, “About eight days after Jesus said this...” (Luke 9:28). This does not mean one of them is wrong. Luke counts both the starting day and the ending day, arriving at eight, while Matthew counts only the days in between, arriving at six.

When we hold these two expressions together, the message of the Gospels becomes clearer. In Scripture, the number six points to the time of human labor and effort. Just as God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, six represents the time of toil we must live through in this world. By contrast, the eighth day points beyond that time. It is the day when God begins something new, the day of resurrection and new creation.

The Transfiguration takes place right at the boundary of these two times. In the midst of the six-day reality of the way of the cross, God allows the light of the eighth day to shine

in advance. God does not wait until suffering is over to show glory. Instead, while we are still walking the path of suffering, God lets us see the light of resurrection first.

Jesus takes only three disciples with him into this moment of glory: Peter, James, and John. Why these three? They were close disciples, but more than that, they represent all the disciples. Though they are still weak and incomplete, they point forward to the church that will one day bear witness to the glory of Christ.

Jesus is transfigured before them, and his face shines like the sun, and his clothes become as white as the light (v. 2). This transfiguration is not a change in Jesus' being, but an event of revelation. The glory of God, which had been hidden within his human flesh, is now revealed. The Jesus the disciples see is not suddenly changed into something new. He is revealing who he has always been, the one who possesses the glory of God.

Scripture does not simply say that Jesus was transfigured. It says that he was transfigured *before them*. This raises an important question. Can Jesus be transfigured before some and not before others? The transfiguration happened before those who went up the mountain with him. It did not happen before those who remained below. In Scripture, the mountain is the place of prayer and the place where God's word is received. If we desire to see the transfigured Christ, let us follow Jesus up the mountain like Peter, James, and John.

Moses and Elijah then appear and speak with Jesus. Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the Prophets. Their presence with Jesus shows that the Law and the Prophets have now reached their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the destination to which the Law and the Prophets have always been pointing.

Significantly, Matthew places this glorious scene immediately after Jesus speaks clearly to his disciples about the way of the cross. This is not accidental. God does not cancel the word of the cross. Instead, God reveals the glory of Jesus to show that the cross itself belongs within God's will and plan. The glory of the Transfiguration does not replace the cross. It interprets that the cross is not a failure.

In this sense, the Transfiguration is not a story only for the disciples. It is a word for us today. There are times in our lives when we face suffering we cannot understand and paths that feel too heavy to bear. Rather than removing the path immediately, God gives us new eyes to see it. That is why the psalmist confesses, "It was good for me to be

afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:71). This is not saying that suffering itself is good, but that through suffering we learn God's way. And we come to see that at the end of God's way, there is glory.

At this moment, Peter speaks up, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters" (v. 4). Peter loves this moment of glory and wants to remain there. But he does not yet understand that this glory is not meant to be confined, but to prepare them to go back down. Peter wants to hold on to the glory, but Jesus intends to carry this glory with him down the path toward the cross.

Then, God speaks directly. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (v. 5). God does not say, "Stay here." He does not say, "Build shelters." Instead, he says, "Listen to him."

The disciples see glory, but God does not allow them to remain in it. God turns them back toward the word. Faith is not completed by seeing alone. It is completed by listening to Jesus' word and obeying it.

What does God want them to listen to? They are to listen to the very words Jesus has already spoken, the words about suffering and the cross. The glory of the Transfiguration is not meant to entertain the disciples' eyes, but to open their ears so that they may once again obey Jesus' word. Glory is not given to help them avoid the cross, but to enable them to walk the way of the cross to the end.

When God says, "Listen to him," the disciples fall facedown and are terrified. Why are they so afraid? The high mountain symbolizes the throne of God. Overwhelmed by the experience of standing in something like the presence of God's throne, they are filled with awe and fear. Their bodies tremble, their strength leaves them, and they fall to the ground. Fear is the most honest human response to the presence of God.

Jesus comes to them, touches them, and raises them up. Because they cannot rise on their own, the Lord approaches them in mercy. Through his touch, he drives away their fear and restores strength to their weakened bodies. This is the gospel. If Jesus had not stood between God and people in his incarnate humanity, the disciples could not have endured hearing the voice of God.

Then Jesus speaks. "Get up. Don't be afraid" (v. 7). The Lord heals not only by his touch, but also by his word. This word is not meant only for the mountaintop. It is given to

disciples who must soon go back down the mountain. It is a word of healing that drives out fear as they prepare to walk the way of the cross once more.

When the disciples lift up their eyes, they see no one except Jesus. Moses is gone. Elijah is gone. The dazzling scene has faded. But Jesus remains. The conclusion of the Transfiguration is not a spectacular experience, but it is Jesus himself. In the journey of faith, what ultimately remains is not an emotional moment; it is Jesus Christ, who walks the road with us.

As they are coming down the mountain, Jesus instructs them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’” (v. 9). After comforting the disciples with glory, God leads them back to the place of mission. The glory of the Transfiguration is not a gift to remain in, but a preparation for returning to the world.

Jesus tells the disciples not to speak about what they have seen because the meaning of the Transfiguration can only be fully understood after passing through the cross and the resurrection. The testimony Jesus desires is not, “We saw something amazing on the mountain,” but, “Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead.” That is the gospel witness.

For this reason, the story of the Transfiguration does not end on the mountain. It continues with the descent. God does not allow us to remain only in moments of glory. He sends us back into life, back into the world. But we do not go down alone. Jesus comes down with us. He touches us in our fear and says, “Get up. Don’t be afraid,” and he leads us on the way of the cross. Glory is not given to avoid the cross, but to enable us to walk the way of the cross to the end.

During the season of Epiphany, God has shown us the glory of Jesus Christ. But that light does not keep us on the mountain. It leads us back into our lives with Jesus. And as we follow him, may we see with eyes of faith that at the end of our journey there is not failure, but glory. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, thank you for allowing us to behold your glory on the mountain through your word today. As we take up our cross and follow you, we trust that you yourself, the Lord of glory, will lead us. Grant that we may taste in our lives even now the glory of the New Jerusalem to which we will one day belong, through the radiance of your face. In the glorious name of Christ. Amen.