

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Transfiguration of Our Lord (Series B)

February 15, 2015

Text: Mark 9:2–9

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Over these past few weeks, I've tried to proclaim the essential message of each gospel reading. I approached each inspired text with the goal of discerning what must be understood, believed, cherished, and proclaimed, as if our most holy faith couldn't exist if I didn't proclaim that essential message in all its truth and purity. No generic, superficial sermons could be tolerated. I told the Wednesday Bible study that today's gospel text was proving to be a challenge, not because there's nothing essential to be found but because there is so much. The gospel reading from Mark 9:2–9 is a very rich text.

I asked myself some of the same questions I did during the previous weeks. What's the essential message, the foundational message? What cannot be lost or obscured without corrupting our most holy faith? And how does that message impact and change the lives of God's people who will hear this sermon?

I must confess that in this case I tried to over think God's Word and the events surrounding our Lord's Transfiguration. It's really quite simple although the message is one of the deepest, most mysterious in Holy Scripture. God the Father provides the essential message, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (vs. 7).

Very simple, in many ways, but profound and absolutely essential. Without this message that Jesus is God's Son worthy of our deepest attention, we cease to be Christian and our immortal souls are in eternal peril. In some ways, there's an urgency about this essential message. We must listen to Jesus, God's Son, or all will be lost. The evangelist Mark recorded these sobering words of the Lord Jesus (8:36), "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" Forfeiture comes through not listening to Jesus. That's how essential this message is.

According to vs. 1, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. There's an interesting time reference, six days. Jesus went up with these three disciples six days after announcing that He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief

priest, and scribes, be killed and then rise again from the dead after three days. It was in the midst of that announcement that Jesus proclaimed that anyone who would be His disciple must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Jesus. And then, Jesus gave His warning about the folly of gaining the world and losing his soul (8:31–38).

For six days, Peter, James, and John must have considered these strange words. Jesus would die and rise again. Following Him meant total self-denial. To refuse such discipleship meant gaining everything – the world and all that it has to offer – only to lose that and what’s even more significant, one’s immortal soul. That’s a weighty, serious teaching under any circumstances.

And then Jesus calls them to follow Him up to a mountain summit. And suddenly, without any apparent warning or notice, Jesus is transfigured before them. His clothes became “radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them” (vs. 3). Purity and holiness and power became visible like never before. Jesus looked different. Oh it was still Jesus. But Jesus like the disciples had never seen Him before.

And then, Moses and Elijah also appear, talking with Jesus. Luke tells us that they were talking about the Lord’s departure, literally His exodus, which He would accomplish through death and resurrection in Jerusalem. This is an experience unparalleled in all of Holy Scripture. Two of the greatest men in Bible appear before your very eyes: Moses, the man who led God’s people out of Egyptian slavery into the Promised; Elijah, the prophet to whom all other prophets were compared. Both were holy men, heroes of the faith. And then there’s Jesus, transfigured in divine radiance.

Have you ever thought you’d like to have that kind of spiritual experience? To see the saints of old? To experience the divine presence directly and powerfully? Well, you wouldn’t be alone if you’ve thought that. On this side of eternity, however, such experiences turn out bad. Look at 5, Peter begins speaking but really shouldn’t have, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” We really don’t know what Peter was hoping to accomplish by building these tents. Vs. 6 give us a clue that whatever Peter’s motivation, it was wrongheaded and insensible, “For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

Want to see God directly? Have powerful visions? Converse with the saint of old? The end result is terror and foolish talk. God the Father must intervene. Remember, He provides the essential message of this text, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him”

(vs. 7). If we don't hear these two, short statements, if we don't believe them and hold them more tenaciously than life itself, we may in fact gain the whole world but lose our soul.

Peter, in his insensible terror, calls Jesus Rabbi, teacher. That's a great honor, especially in 1st century Israel. But it doesn't even come close to grasping our Lord's true identity. Jesus is the Son of God. Equal to the Father in all respect, sharing in His Father's divine nature in all respects, yet He is distinct from the Father. The Father and the Son aren't two gods. Jesus is certainly not less god, inferior to His Father. Both are God. And the Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus at His baptism is also fully and completely God. One God in three persons. That's the divine mystery of the Holy Trinity. That's the divine life into which you are baptized, dear saints!

You are Trinitarian Christians from beginning to end. A generic "god" will never do for us. We worship one God, in three person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In all the talk and discussion about God in the public square, you must remember and confess who it is that you worship. The term "God" has become too generic, almost misleading. You worship the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But today's essential message focuses upon Jesus, the Son of God, the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity. And yet there's more to Jesus than even this. He's also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. The Father did not take on human flesh and blood, nor did the Holy Spirit. Only the beloved Son of the Father was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. Jesus is true God and true man in one Person.

For a few, brief moments, Peter, James, and John saw the glory of Jesus' two natures. It was through the human body of Jesus that the three disciples saw the divine glory. Jesus is the Son of the Father become man for the salvation of the world. That's who He is. We cannot be Christian without knowing and having faith in this Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, Son of Mary.

Because of who Jesus is, the Father declares "listen to him" (vs. 7). Everyone else must recede into the background. We must hear Jesus. Even Moses and Elijah must give way to the Divine Son of the Father. They can't be put on an equal footing with Jesus which is what was being suggested by Peter when he offered to construct three tents. Jesus was one super-saint among the other two heroes of the faith. But that will never do. The Law, as represented by Moses, and the prophets, as represented by

Elijah, proclaim the Son of the Father. They proclaim Jesus. And they must be heard only as they proclaim Jesus.

And what did Jesus tell His disciples before climbing the Mount of Transfiguration? Remember the time reference in vs. 2? After six days? Jesus proclaimed that He must die and rise again on the third day. That His disciples, from youngest to oldest, every man, woman and child who would claim the name of Jesus must take up their cross and follow Him. To not listen to Jesus would mean gaining the world and all that it has to offer but in the end losing the world and your immortal soul.

Dear saints of God the Father, we must listen to His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. So many voices in our day would tell us to downplay the preaching of Jesus. Large groups from within the Christian Church would tell us to stop preaching Jesus' cross of Calvary, to stop emphasizing the sacraments as they teach about Good Friday and Easter, to move on to other topics like Biblical stewardship and money, raising godly families, the right context for the expression of sex, social concerns, human trafficking, the dissolution of virtue and goodness in society. All of these are worthy topics. But we must listen to Jesus. As He speaks to these issues, we listen, follow, and obey. But everything our Lord teaches finds its touchstone in His cross and empty tomb.

This entire Epiphany season has really been about discovering who Jesus is and listening to Him. Jesus preaches the Kingdom of God, heals physical and spiritual infirmities, defeats death and devils because He is the Son of the Father come to save us from a horrific eternity.

Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father. He says He has come to forgive you, love you, save you, and make you His own, now in time and forever in eternity. Listen to Jesus and everything He has to say about you. You are the beloved of the Lord. Listen to Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.