



Transfiguration of the Lord
19 February 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

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

I spent part of last week in New Orleans. The planning for the 2024 Youth Gathering has begun. Ascension expects to take 20-25 students and adults to the gathering in the summer of 2024. We will, for the first time, be able to have some of our students attend the Multi-Cultural Youth Leadership Event or MYLE which is a pre-gathering event for Lutheran students of color. I could not be more excited. My wife – not so much – since she knows what comes with saying yes to the planning and preparing to provide the creation and production of an event that will gather close to 22,000 high school students and adults. Although, this time around, I am more relaxed than ever. Let me tell you why. Guess who they invited to be in charge of safety for the youth gathering next summer? That’s right! Our very own - Pastor Tony was invited to be the new manager for safety for the youth gathering. We will be just fine! And also – Pastor Tony – good luck!

I share the planning news of the youth gathering with you because in 1991, I was literally transformed by attending the gathering as a high school student. I remember being in Dallas in one of two arenas for the 36,000 students who attended that year. The world looked very different back then. The church also looked very different. I took my first taxi ride alone in 1991 because I overslept and almost missed my moment on stage in front of 24,000 students as part of a skit about the fruits of the Spirit. Look how far we have come. Thank God we have come so far. We do not do skits anymore – too old school. And yet, in those 5 days I was transformed by the experience. I met high school students from around the country and around the world. I stood in a stadium surrounded by 24,000 other Lutheran Christian high school students and realized that I was a part of a community I had no idea existed. After seminary, the church I served in CA took more than 40 students and adults to Atlanta, GA. In 2006, I brought students from my congregation in Boise, ID to San Antonio and then to New Orleans in 2009. And from Ascension, we have brought students in 2012 to New Orleans, in 2015 to Detroit, and in 2018 to Houston. Whether as a student or now as someone who plans, creates, and produces a part of the youth gathering – the resulting view is still the same – utter awe, mind-blown expectations, and the recognition that the Kingdom of God has come near as students let go of their fears and walls to walk together in a moment of community that, if we blink for too long, is over before we have the chance to see and appreciate all that God is doing. Still some 33 years later, through the experience of the gathering, I am transformed—transfigured in some way. This day the story of Jesus on the mountaintop calls us to much the same adventure.

Jesus takes the top tier of disciples up the mountain. Peter, James, and John make the climb not really knowing what is about to happen. Perhaps Jesus wants some quiet time to pray—maybe he just needs a break from the noise and the demands placed upon him—it was not an unusual request for their teacher to call for some of them to follow. Little did they know what would await them at the top of the mountain.

I always appreciate another version of the story: ¹⁻³ *Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.* ⁴ *Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?”* ⁵ *While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”* ⁶⁻⁸ *When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only*



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Jesus. ⁹ Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. "Don't breathe a word of what you've seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk."

And then just as quickly as everything began—it ends. Jesus no longer shines like the sun, Moses and Elijah are gone and the disciples are left wondering if it was a dream—or something more. I wonder if you recognize the moment. We are so often overwhelmed when the moments come. When we are so caught up in joy, wonder, amazement that we are unable to capture the moment in our memory – so instead, we retain a glimpse. Perhaps the day you got married. The birth of a child. The moment you celebrated hearing the words “cancer-free.” The moment so overwhelms that we are unable to take it all in. That is today for the disciples. Jesus is changed and so too have the disciples been changed on the mountaintop this day. The story is much the same in the world we live in.

Frances Gum transfigured herself and her image into who-- Judy Garland. Archibald Leach became-- Cary Grant. And would you have paid money to see Marion Morrison in the movies? Maybe, but Marion didn't take that chance, he became John Wayne. Dana Owens became Queen Latifah. Peter Hernandez became Bruno Mars. Katheryn Hudson became Katy Perry. And if you are tracking Superbowl half-time shows...Robyn Fenty became Rihanna. Don't forget that in the Bible many people got new names to go with a new life and a new image. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob became Israel. Saul became Paul. Simon became Peter, "The Rock." Transfigurations are not the exception. They are the rule. We are all being altered in the appearance of our face, our countenance. We are all changing. To live is to be continually transfigured...writes Pastor Robert Johnson.

It is certainly the desire for many of us to be changed—transfigured in some way. I would love a full head of curly hair, some might want to be thin, others want to be more generous, others want to be popular, compassionate, spiritual, changed from who they are today. It is the proverbial grass is always greener on the other side kind of attitude. And if you look at the story of Jesus this day—is the grass greener after the moment on the mountaintop? Certainly, for the disciples the world is new and different—their faith is strengthened—their eyes opened to the power of God in Jesus Christ—but for Jesus will the grass be greener or does he go down into the valley to face what will come—the dark clouds of judgment on the horizon are beginning to form—where will the footsteps of Jesus lead us in the days ahead?

The words of Martin Luther King's "Mountain Top speech" the day before he was shot are for us this day: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

For Peter, James, and John, and for all of us—this day, we have seen the promised land in a whole new way. No, temple, no land of milk and honey—instead we have seen the promises of God made real in the person of Jesus Christ. And if we blink for too long, we might miss the moment – the glimpse of all that God has in store for us. Keep up, my friends, we still have a ways to go to get to the top, but we will get there together. The mountaintop is God's promise to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.