

Rev. Danny Mackey
Transfiguration
January 21, 2018
Matthew 17:1-9
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

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

And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here."

The first sermon I ever wrote was on this text, on Matthew's account of Jesus' Transfiguration. At the time, I hadn't a clue how to even begin writing a sermon. Sometimes, I wonder if the situation has gotten any better. All kinds of thoughts and considerations went around in my head. I wondered if I should open with a joke. I struggled with distinguishing and applying Law and Gospel. I read and re-read the text, asking that most Lutheran of questions, "What does this mean?" And I still didn't truly get the point.

I felt like Peter in our lesson, bumbling around and saying silly things like "If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Peter didn't know what to think. Maybe Peter just felt like he had to do something. Likewise, I didn't know what to think as I looked at my very first sermon text. I just felt like I had to come up with something.

For almost two weeks I struggled with writing that sermon. Draft after draft found its way into the wastepaper basket. The afternoon before the sermon was due, I told a buddy of mine what was happening. He told me to talk to someone who had a better idea of what was going on—a second-year seminarian! Admittedly, second-year seminarians don't know much (and even less than they think they do); however, they know quite a bit more than a lowly first-year. That older student, Ted Krey, showed me a little trick: a way to better understand the Scriptures. He had opened up his hymnal to the hymn we sang as our opening, "'Tis Good, Lord, to Be Here."

In our hymnal we have a great treasure of the Church. You will forget my sermon—probably as soon as I finish—but the song of the Church will stick with you. The hymns that we sing, if they're good hymns, teach the faith, expound upon the Bible, confess Jesus and Him crucified for us, and share the Gospel. Through learning and loving our hymns and spiritual songs, God's Word will have its way with you and preserve you to eternal life. So, this morning, let us together do what I did for the first time over ten years ago—open your

hymnal to 414, to Joseph Robinson's "'Tis Good, Lord, to Be Here"—and let us have it preach to us a sermon of Jesus' Transfiguration.

*'Tis good, Lord, to be here!
Thy glory fills the night;
Thy face and garments, like the sun,
Shine with unborrowed light.*

This first stanza is quite easy to understand. It takes the text on the most basic of levels and echoes what happened when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus receive glory from God the Father, heard His voice, and were with Jesus on the holy mountain. Jesus' face shone like the sun and His clothes became as white as light.

But there are two very interesting lines from which we can learn. First, whose glory fills the night? "Thy glory," that is, Jesus' glory. It is His glory, not someone else's. Second, the light is "unborrowed." The first and second express the same point: Jesus is God. He doesn't take the Father's glory, but rather shares in it because He and the Father are One God, along with the Holy Spirit. He doesn't shine with a worldly light, but rather with the light of this world's Creator and God. It's the light that shone days before the sun and the moon were even created!

What then does this stanza teach us about the Transfiguration? It teaches us that the Transfiguration declares that Jesus is the true God, or, as Peter had confessed just a week before—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

*'Tis good, Lord, to be here,
Thy beauty to behold
Where Moses and Elijah stand,
Thy messengers of old.*

We need to know our Old Testament to fully understand the second stanza. As Matthew 17 says, Jesus appeared in His glory with two people talking with Him: Moses and Elijah. Peter's bumbling words about tent making reveal to us that Peter knew immediately just who these two people were. How could he know? St. Paul tells us that in heaven we will know even as we are fully known. That means we will know who everyone is—no forgetting anyone's name. Heaven's reality came crashing into Peter, allowing him to know these two great saints.

And who are Moses and Elijah? Moses, the leader of God's people out of Egypt and through the wilderness, the giver of the Ten Commandments, the writer of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, the Torah. Elijah, the prophet extraordinaire, who constantly called God's people to repentance, who fought and defeated the enemies of God, who was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind. These two men represent for us the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah).

"Thy messengers of old"—whose messengers? Jesus' messengers. And what was their message? The One who sent them: Jesus. As Jesus declared, He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Jesus teaches us that everything in the Old Testament is about Him and His working of our salvation. And where do Moses and Elijah stand? They stand beside and upon Christ.

What then does this stanza teach us about the Transfiguration? Moses and Elijah's presence tell us that what they preached, taught, and confessed is the same message of the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed and accomplished... for us men and for our salvation.

*Fulfiller of the past
And hope of things to be,
We hail Thy body glorified
And our redemption see.*

This third stanza takes the fulfillment of the past—"I did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them"—and directs us to the constant assurance of the things to be.

Here we focus on the very body of Christ, glorified and a promise of our own glorification. It's wrapped up in that word in our last line: redemption. What does the word "redeem" mean? It means to "buy back with a price." A price must be paid because, by our sin, we've accrued a great debt. "The wages of sin," says St. Paul, "is death." That's what we earned. Death was the price to be paid. Jesus paid the price for our death with His own. He thus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. So we can proclaim: Jesus redeemed us and all people. He took our death upon Himself and exchanged it for His glory.

What then does this stanza teach us about the Transfiguration? It tells us that Jesus gave to Peter, James, and John assurance of future glory, guaranteed by Jesus' buying us from sin,

death, and the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. In Jesus we have hope in our own glorification.

*Before we taste death,
We see Thy kingdom come;
We long to hold the vision bright
And make this hill our home.*

In the fourth stanza, we bask in the shining glory of Jesus' awesome power. It uses the language of "taste" and "see." "Taste and see that the Lord is good," says the psalmist. Also, the stanza states that we see God's kingdom come and that we long to stay in the vision of God's beauty.

We've got a few major things going on here. First, the stanza is talking about the time before our deaths, that is, our present existence. But that present reality is held off a bit as we stand in Jesus' presence. Second, what is God's kingdom? It is when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives according to the Word. How do we see His kingdom come? Through His means of grace—Word and Sacrament. "Taste and see"—the Sacrament of the Altar, right? Where do we encounter the real presence of Christ? The same Sacrament, for it gives to us the very body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Third and last, the stanza speaks of "this hill." Jesus was transfigured on a mountain. Jesus was crucified on a Mount Calvary. We worship on a high and holy hill, Mount Zion.

Therefore, this stanza tells us that when we gather around Word and Sacrament, we behold God's kingdom, heaven, and eternal salvation. Like Peter, we want to stay here, longing for an end to our mortal suffering. We declare, as with another spiritual song, "Heaven is my home." Yes, just as the disciples saw heaven and earth intersect on that sacred mountain, we behold heaven and earth intersected in Christ's body and blood on our altar. It's a good place to be.

*'Tis good, Lord, to be here!
Yet we may not remain;
But since Thou bidst us leave the mount,
Come with us to the plain.*

The fifth and final stanza brings us back to our present situation, to our existence in the world. We can't remain on the heights of spiritual bliss, but we must needs to go on with our lives.

We have an image of the mount and the plain below it. The hymn points out that the future-and-promised glory of our Lord's Transfiguration journeyed down the mountain and onward to Jerusalem. Jesus' words to the three disciples were "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." The plain is the valley in the shadow of death. Jesus' own glory is under the shadow of cross. It's appropriate that we go from the Transfiguration and into Lent (or Pre-Lent), which leads us to Christ's cross and death and onward to resurrection. The Church Fathers who put together our lectionary knew what they were doing.

Since Jesus "bidst us leave the mount," we ask Him to come with us into this life, into our sufferings and situation—which often looks more like Good Friday than Easter Sunday. Yet, as David says in Psalm 23, "I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Jesus is with us, because He is our Immanuel. He leads us through the valley, along the plain to Calvary, and to the resurrection glory.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus + to life everlasting.