

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Transfiguration – January 21, 2024
Matthew 17:1-9 – Something More Sure
Rev Peter Wagner

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

Perhaps at some point in your life you've had a mountaintop spiritual experience. Maybe a triumphant feast day like today. Or a moment when you felt assured of God's presence and love. Maybe you were anxious, and you prayed or came to church, and then you were filled with inner peace. Or perhaps you thought you felt God's presence or heard his voice. Such experiences can be very comforting, but are they trustworthy? Should they be the basis for our faith? Of course not. Because they don't last. Inner feelings are much less assuring than external promises, external means of grace. Hearing a pastor say you are forgiven, or receiving the Lord's Supper, these are the basis of faith. A spiritual inner feeling cannot keep you going when the daily grind of life returns, when the journey gets harder than you expected.

In today's gospel, Peter, James, and John had a mountaintop experience, one better than any of our own. It was external, it was real. When the three disciples went up on the mountain with Jesus, they saw him transfigured in glory. This was a vision of the triumphant king, the risen Lord. They saw Jesus as he would soon appear on Easter Sunday, in all his majesty, shining white, coming out of the tomb. Not the Jesus they were used to seeing, not a humble Galilean rabbi. Here stood the King of kings and Lord of lords, the resurrected Savior of the world.

The vision on the mount of Transfiguration, of Jesus in his glory, was to assure the disciples of his resurrection day. They saw his glory beforehand, glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. But even this great vision of Jesus was not enough to keep them going. When afterward the disciples descended from the mountain, they still didn't understand. Nor did they understand when they watched Jesus go to Jerusalem, to be mocked and spit upon and condemned. They were filled with fear, not peace, when they watched him climb another mountain, Mount Golgotha, to be crucified. Even though he told them over and over that he would die and rise again, they were hopeless. They did not believe.

And even when Jesus was finally raised at Easter, they did not immediately understand. It took some time before they recognized the fulfillment of the great Transfiguration they saw before.

Only after the day of Pentecost, when the apostles received power from the Holy Spirit, only then did they boldly go out into the world to bear witness to the risen Savior. Then, filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter finally understood the Transfiguration he had seen. And then he wrote, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

But then Peter adds something very interesting. He writes, "And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

Peter means that every single Christian has something better than seeing Jesus transfigured in light. We have something to give even more confidence that Christ is risen from the dead. We have no need to ever doubt that our Lord is truly lives and reigns to all eternity as our king. Because we have the prophetic word, the word of Scripture in the Old Testament, that foretold it all long ago.

So you will do well to pay attention. Pay attention to the prophetic word in the Bible. It's far more sure than Peter's mountaintop experience, or any inner spiritual feeling. So many Christian families never open God's word. So many parents neglect to read it to their children. But according to the very words of Peter in Scripture, what we have written in the Bible is better even than seeing with our own eyes Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain.

So pay attention to the prophetic word. Bind it in your hearts. Memorize it. Meditate on it day and night. Start by reading it daily, out loud, with your family. A psalm or a chapter of one of the gospels. Larger chunks and chapters at a time will help you understand the bigger picture. And also, come to Bible Study. My goal in Bible Study is to teach you to make connections and interpret the prophetic word faithfully.

Surely you would jump at the chance to climb the mountain with Peter, James, and John to see Jesus transfigured. But you have something more sure here in church, and in your very home. You have something more sure every time God's people gather to read and mediate upon the prophetic word together. Soak it up, your precious water of life.

For after the mountaintop experience, times of doubt or discouragement come to all Christians. Does God listen to prayer? Is Jesus really God? Did he rise again? Is Christianity the way of salvation? Does baptism really save? Is heaven real? Is God even there at all? When questions like these trouble you, remember that you have something more sure, God's prophetic word.

You have the prophetic word that testifies to the death and resurrection of the Son of God, for you. You have the prophetic word that reveals not only the day of Transfiguration, but Easter morning itself. The resurrection of our Lord was clearly seen by trustworthy eyewitnesses, who saw the living Savior with their own eyes. They even died as martyrs for that truth.

And you don't have to trust the eyewitness testimony of the apostles alone, because you also have the testimony of the Father himself, spoken through the cloud of the Holy Spirit, recorded in Scripture by the prophets and evangelists as the Spirit gave them utterance. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him."

This is God's beloved Son. Listen to his words. Especially as we get ready to enter soon into the season of Lent, as we descend from the mountaintop experience of Christmas and Epiphany into a season of penitence and sorrow for our sins. And then as we go down further still to Good Friday and the bitter death of our Lord, listen to his word. On the cross we see how we all bear responsibility for our Savior's death. Our sins nailed him there. Truly we confess, I crucified thee.

As we meditate on these sobering things, as we consider our own deep guilt that caused our Lord to die, think back on the Transfiguration of Jesus, the revelation beforehand of his resurrection. And remember that what we have is even more sure: the prophetic word, that foretold his resurrection long ago.

Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountain as the chief representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Pay attention to their prophetic word.

The resurrection was there even in the first prophecy of the Old Testament, in the words of God's curse to the serpent, that the Messiah would bruise the heel of the woman's offspring, but that he would crush his head. This prophetic word revealed the triumph of Jesus, to fatally crush the serpent, rising triumphant over sin and death and hell forever.

And the resurrection was there in the words of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53. Isaiah saw God's suffering servant, despised and afflicted by men. Surely he has borne our sorrows, he was pierced for our transgressions, and by his stripes we are healed. By his death the many will be accounted righteous. This is the sure prophetic word. It proved true in Jesus in every detail.

Pay attention, and love these words. For like when the disciples fell on their faces in terror, and when they heard the voice from heaven, then Jesus came and touched them and said, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

So it is with the sure prophetic word. The whole center of all Scripture is no one but Jesus only. He is the focus of every line of the Old Testament, the shining light of the New. As Peter declared in another sermon, in Acts 10, "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

And as Jesus himself testified in John 5:39, "Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness about me." And on the day of Easter, the very day when he rose and fulfilled the Transfiguration vision, he walked to Emmaus with the disciples, and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Dear saints, you have something more sure than any mountaintop experience. You have these prophetic words. You have them in your ears and in your hands and before your eyes, every day of your earthly sojourn. And these words testify of no one but your King, to Jesus only. Amen.

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