

Sermon on Luke 9:28-36
Transfiguration of Our Lord Sunday, March 3, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

It's been a busy week in Minnesota, where we have experienced snowstorms and frigid blasts of cold as we long to say goodbye to winter and hello to spring. We have witnessed explosive politics in our nation's Capitol and in countries across the globe, seen and heard earnest debates about guns and public policy in hearings at the State Legislature. At the same time we have gone about our daily lives, working, playing, eating, sleeping, dodging cars and shoveling snow. Some of you have started preparing your tax returns, while some of us have applied for Medicare. Some here have been making plans for Lent, the season of repentance, spiritual renewal, and preparation for Easter which begins this Ash Wednesday. So what do stories of mountains and miracles, healings and a strange Biblical event called "The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus" have to do with us, as we go about trying to survive the final blasts of winter, while dreaming of warm, sunny skies, wishing we were in warmer waters of the Caribbean – anywhere but here! Sit down, set a spell, and let me tell you the story. But first, a question:

How many of you have ever taken a trip up a mountain – any mountain? Last month my daughter Lori spent her school break in Maui, Hawaii, where she drove to the summit of Mauna Kea, the tallest mountain in the world (33,000 feet from its base on the ocean floor). Mauna Kea is a million-year-old dormant volcano, sacred to Hawaiians. It has clear skies, perfect for watching sunrise or sunset, and its dry atmosphere mean that 13 telescopes from eleven countries search the skies. It gets cold on the summit, however, which Lori learned the hard way – being dressed for the beach but not the mountains! But the week after Lori returned to Minnesota it SNOWED on Mauna Kea! You can never escape!

I have never been to Hawaii, but I have been to Mount Rainier, in the North Cascades near Seattle, Washington. I remember driving into Seattle on a sunny, summer day, and seeing Mount Rainier's snow-capped peak in the distance, shining brilliantly against the blue skies. My college friends and I decided to drive to see it up close. But as soon as we got to the foot of the mountain, the fog rolled in. We drove higher and higher back and forth on the switchbacks, but we never saw the mountain, hidden in the clouds! The closer we got to it, the less we could see. Being a budding biblical scholar, I thought of how the clouds enveloped Jesus and his disciples on the mountain just before his Transfiguration in the gospels. But I never saw the glory of God on Mount Rainier, unfortunately.

In Luke's gospel, we heard how Jesus went on retreat to pray, after weeks of traveling around Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing. Jesus had just fed 5000

people with five loaves of bread and fishes, which brought even more crowds. He must have been exhausted. Jesus needed a sabbatical, so he took Peter, James and John up the mountain with him to pray. Luke doesn't name the mountain – tradition says it is Mount Tabor, where churches have since been built to commemorate the Transfiguration, but some say it is Mount Hermon. You will have to go see for yourself! But on this mountain, as the disciples were dozing off while Jesus prayed, they saw his face “transfigured” – shining with radiant light, and then the disciples saw Jesus conversing with Moses and the prophet Elijah! They spoke about Jesus' upcoming “exodus” that he would experience in Jerusalem – his suffering and death. Peter was so impressed that he had to say something – that they should build a booth right there for each of the three holy men, to celebrate the feast of protection for God's people as they had wandered in the wilderness in the Exodus. But a cloud of fog descended upon them all, and they heard a voice call out “*This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!*” And then they were alone, and Jesus told them to say nothing. Very strange, indeed.

Jesus had been “transfigured”, changed in appearance, in Greek the word is *metamorphoses*, and now his mission was transformed. This was a turning point in the gospel, as Jesus and his disciples descended the mountain, and he turned his face toward Jerusalem, where he would challenge the religious authorities, be betrayed by his own disciples, suffer and die on a cross. The disciples didn't have a clue that such things could happen, so they were silent about what they had seen. You would be too! But from his conversations on the mountain, Jesus was clear.

As they came down from the mountain the next day, a great crowd was there to meet Jesus. A man shouted out to beg Jesus to look at his son, who was possessed by a demon. Luke described how the spirit seized the boy into convulsions. The disciples were powerless to help. But Jesus rebuked the spirit, healed the boy, and returned him to his father. *All were astounded at the greatness of God* - because of the exorcism, knowing nothing about Jesus on the mountain.

We can only wonder at this strange story of Jesus' Transfiguration. It's beyond our experience – most of us have never had such visions of glory – to us a spiritual experience happens maybe in worship, in prayer or in song, not out in the world. Or maybe we have a “mountaintop experience” out in nature. But the lesson here is that this was the last fantastic event that would happen with Jesus until the resurrection – the rest of the story is his journey to Jerusalem, the continuing of his ministry with real people, his arrest, trial, and Passion story. The transfiguration was a brief episode, but then the drama continues.

Then Jesus came down from the mountain experience and all of a sudden is confronted with his daily challenges dealing with real people and their problems. I was reminded how this is just how it is with us. We can have a worshipful experience in church on Sunday, but then we go home, and the drudgery and

challenges of daily life begin again on Monday – like Sunday never happened, if we don't hold on to what we heard. You leave this place, and the snow in your driveway is still there, waiting to be shoveled! The problems you think you left on Friday, are there at work to meet you on Monday morning. The traffic jam on I-94 recreates itself during rush hour, and they are still arguing over politics on cable news 24-hours a day. Your children or grandchildren still may have that cough and cold that kept them out of school last week; you have that doctor's appointment to keep, and tax returns to file. We sang some great hymns of faith today in church, but return to the daily slog tomorrow. Life goes on.

I thought about this last Thursday evening, when I attended a hearing at the State Office Building by a House committee about a bill to give all Minnesota residents the right to apply for driver's licenses, regardless of citizenship status. I went to hear the stories of immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Central America, human beings who testified before the committee of legislators, who had the power to change the law which keeps them from driving legally in Minnesota (a right which immigrants once had, until 2003). It reminded me of the father who begged Jesus to exorcize that demon from his son who suffered, or the woman who asked Jesus to heal her from a hemorrhage which had lasted for years, or all those crowds of people who came to bring their sick children or elder parents, the crippled, the lame, the deaf and the blind for healing. The people of Minnesota were coming to their elected representatives (for whom they had no right to vote) to beg for healing – for the right to drive to work, to the grocery store, to school with their children, that we all take for granted as citizen observers. I heard about a woman from Africa who seeks asylum, who has to WALK miles from her home in Northfield through the snow to get downtown to appointments or the grocery store, carrying her infant daughter and her 5-year-old in her hand, because she is not allowed to drive, the bus is unreliable, and she cannot afford a cab. I heard the citizen from Roseville plead for his immigrant neighbor, who had fled gangs in Guatemala who had threatened his life because he had discovered the body of a murdered man. He had driven without a license, was pulled over for a broken taillight, put in jail, and now is guilty of the crime of driving illegally. He is likely to be deported this week, sent back to Guatemala, and he will most likely be killed if the gangs find him. So many people facing tragic consequences, so many people dealing with unneeded challenges, so many mothers and fathers, students and hard-working, peaceful neighbors living in fear of being detained, or fined, or deported because they cannot get a driver's license. I can understand now how Jesus must have felt when he faced those crowds of people coming to him, with their sick children and relatives, begging him to heal them, because they heard Jesus had the power to help them. I feel the same way when people come to me, not every day, but often in my work as a pastor, and beg me to help them with some food for their children,

to help with the rent or the heat bill, bus fare or some gas to get to work. It is overwhelming sometimes, because I don't have the power or the resources to help everybody, and I can't always judge how true their story is, on my own.

But Jesus listened with compassion to the people who came to him, even after he came down from the mountain after his Transfiguration, because they had hope in him. This is why people went to the legislature last Thursday to testify. They had hope for their lives, from a change in this law, if only this legislative committee would listen to their story, have compassion, and respond. If you could only have seen the joy in their faces when the committee voted to move the bill on to the next committee in the process! I am sharing this story with you because I was so impressed with the hope people had that night, with the respect by which they treated others and the committee, and the depth of their present suffering and their fear. Can our hearts be so hard as to not listen to their pain?

I don't know how this bill will turn out. In previous years, it has never passed the House or Senate, because other priorities came first, or because legislatures don't want to "rock the boat", or a governor might veto the bill. But I do know how Jesus responded to the pleas of the people who came to him: he heard them with compassion. He challenged his disciples, who were unable to respond to such pleas, with the harsh words, "*You faithless and perverse generation!*" Then he astounded everyone with his compassion and power to heal.

That's the example Jesus gives us: have compassion, and do what you can, in your power, to help in the healing of those around you. You and I don't have the power of Jesus, but we have his example of love, mercy, and compassion for others. Even for those whom we don't think deserve it! In the gospel, the voice from heaven said, "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*" Jesus is the one whom God has sent for you and me to follow. We say this in our Creed. Jesus shows us how to listen to the voices of human beings who cry out in pain for healing and for justice, and what to do in response. Listen to him, follow his example, love one another as he has loved us. And you do, when you hear the call to provide shelter here in this church: when you open your hearts and these doors to families with Project Home, and give your time as hosts, to welcome them and keep them safe. God is glorified when you and I do this, in the name of Jesus.

This is clearly the call of God to us in the gospel. We have seen Jesus' glory in the story of his Transfiguration. We pray that God will transform us with mercy, compassion and grace, so that you and I will be empowered to hear one another with mercy and compassion, and treat each other with love. Perhaps when others see us Christians treating others with God's love, *they will be astounded at the greatness of God!* May God's will be done. Amen!