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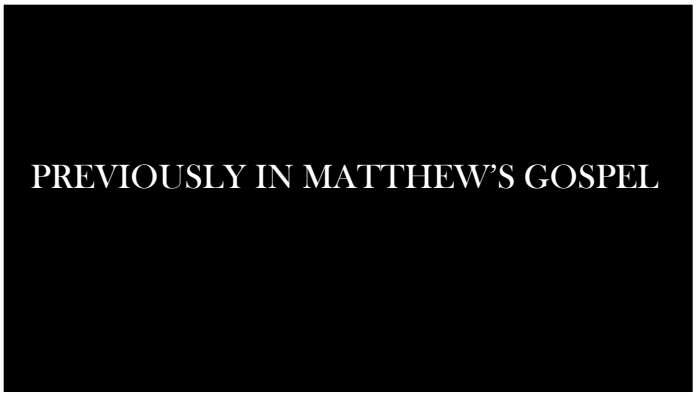
Pastor Sue Westhorp
Address for: Transfiguration
Preached: February 15th 2026

Listening to the light

Bible reference for sermon Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Today's gospel reading reminds me of one of those storytelling techniques we often see on TV. The episode begins with a dramatic event that leaves us wondering what on earth is going on. Then we are given the title on the screen, "six days earlier" and we learn what led to the events we have just seen.



So – "previously in Matthew's gospel"…

six days earlier…

Jesus had said words no disciple ever wanted to hear. He spoke about suffering, rejection, Jerusalem, and death.

Peter, good-hearted and impulsive as ever, took Jesus aside and rebuked him. "This must never happen to you, Lord." And Jesus responded with words just as confronting: "Get behind me, Satan… If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

That is the emotional ground beneath today's gospel. The Transfiguration does not float in mid-air. It rises straight out of fear, confusion, and the shadow of the cross. It is into that shadow that Jesus leads Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain, by themselves.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. The word Matthew uses means to be changed in form, to be revealed as something more than what was previously seen.

And suddenly Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Jesus. It is strange, mysterious, and certainly outside our everyday experience. But that does not make it meaningless. Matthew knows exactly what he is doing.

In this Gospel, mountains are places where heaven presses close to earth. Jesus teaches on mountains. He commissions on mountains. Revelation happens on mountains. And now, after the first clear announcement of the cross, Matthew gives the disciples a vision of glory. Not glory as escape, not glory as denial of suffering, but glory as God's verdict on the path Jesus is about to walk.

Moses and Elijah are not there to be replaced or dismissed. They represent the long story of God's faithfulness. Moses encountered God on Sinai and came down with a shining face. Elijah met God on the mountain in the sound of sheer silence. Both Moses and Elijah knew rejection. Both trusted God when the future looked uncertain. Their presence says this: the God at work in Jesus is the same God who has always been at work. This is not a new religion cancelling an old one; it is God keeping promises, stretching from Israel's story into the future God is bringing.

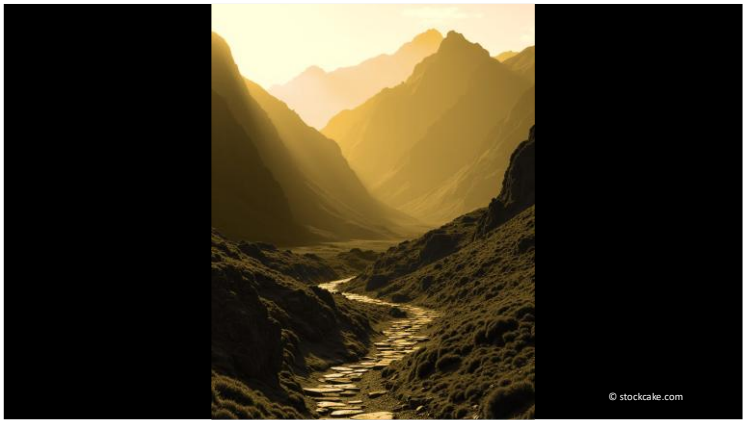
Overwhelmed, Peter blurts out, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three dwellings…" We sometimes give Peter a hard time, but he is not being foolish; he is being human. When light breaks through fear, we want to hold onto it. When clarity comes, we want to freeze the moment. When God feels close, we want to build something permanent. Peter wants to preserve the experience, to stay on the mountain. But while he is still speaking, God interrupts him. Sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is stop talking.

A bright cloud overshadows them, just as it did on Sinai and in the wilderness. And the voice speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." The declaration is familiar. It echoes the words spoken at Jesus' baptism. But now there is a command. "Listen to him." Listen not just when his words comfort, but when they unsettle. Listen when he speaks of crosses, of losing life to save it, of faithfulness in the face of rejection. This is not an invitation to admire Jesus from a distance; it is a call to trust him, even when his way is hard.

The disciples fall to the ground, overcome with fear. That is the right response to holiness. But then, beautifully, Jesus comes to them. He touches them. And he says, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” God’s glory does not crush. God’s presence does not annihilate. God comes close enough to touch. The same hands that will soon be pierced are laid gently on frightened shoulders. And when the disciples look up, Moses is gone, Elijah is gone, and only Jesus remains. When everything else falls away—certainty, clarity, even mountaintop experiences—Jesus remains.

As they come down the mountain, Jesus orders them to tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Glory without the cross is dangerous. Light without suffering becomes triumphalism. Resurrection cannot be understood apart from death. The Transfiguration only makes sense in retrospect. Like so many moments in our own lives, its meaning becomes clear only later, after endurance, after grief, after trust has been tested.

Matthew’s community knew that struggle well. They lived with conflict, both within their congregation and with others around them. They faced pressure from Roman power, tension over identity and belonging, and disappointment that the world still looked so broken. Some were losing heart. Some were drifting away. And Matthew offers this story as assurance. God has not abandoned the world. God has not failed in Jesus. God’s future is already breaking in, even if it is not yet complete. The resurrection has begun the transformation. Stay faithful. Listen to him. Keep walking.



We too live between mountain and valley. We know moments of clarity, when faith feels strong and hope shines brightly. And we know long valleys of illness, grief, conflict, doubt, and weariness. The Transfiguration does not promise escape from the valley. It promises presence. Jesus goes with us down the mountain. Jesus walks toward the cross. Jesus is with us when we are afraid.

And this vision also shapes who we are becoming. Paul tells us that we are being transformed from glory to glory. The church is called to live in the world while shining with the light of the kingdom. Not triumphal, not perfect, but faithful.

Today stands between Epiphany and Lent, between light revealed and light hidden, between glory glimpsed and glory crucified. God gives us just enough light to keep going. Not enough to avoid suffering, but enough to trust Jesus through it. As we begin the journey toward the cross, we carry this with us: God has chosen Jesus. God is faithful. God's future is real. And Jesus is with us always.

So listen to him. And do not be afraid.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133