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THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

Last Sunday after Epiphany

February 15, 2026

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Saint Matthew 17:1-9

In nomine Jesu!

Today's Gospel - the story of Jesus' Transfiguration - is the strangest story in the New Testament. For centuries, biblical scholars and others have wondered, "Did this really happen?" Some labeled it a "misplaced resurrection story." Some have monetized it. Today in Israel, less-than-scrupulous tour guides will eagerly take tourists to, not one, but two Transfiguration mountain sites.

I have questions too. My questions are not about if this happened, but about why Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but not John, included it in their gospel. Why did these evangelists think their readers needed this story? What's its purpose, its use? We've got as busy day, so I won't beat around the bush. This story is included so the evangelists can address three issues for their first readers then that remain issues for us today.

The first is to show continuity. It was critical that Matthew, Mark, and Luke show their mostly Jewish critics that Jesus' story was consistent with their story' and there are no greater iconic figures in what we call Old Testament history than Moses and Elijah to show that because, according to Scripture and their Jewish tradition, neither of these figures died. In the Torah, while Moses is allowed to see the Promised Land, he is not allowed to enter. Jewish tradition says that he died and God buried him and according to the last verses of Deuteronomy "no one knows his burial place to this day." Elijah's story is similar. In 2 Kings 2, as his protégé Elisha watches, Elijah is whisked away in a heavenly Uber - a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horses disappearing in a whirlwind. Who better than them to "suddenly appear and talk with" Jesus.

We need continuity too, for the polar opposite reason. Today's nationalist fundamentalists wish to decouple "the Law and the Prophets" from the Gospel teachings of Jesus because such teaching is "weak," not masculine enough, and no longer applicable today. This story, along which Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets show that de-coupling to be nothing more than a self-serving lie. We need to reject that de-coupling and affirm our Scriptures' continuity.

The second is to give encouragement. Luke reports that Peter, James, and John were “terrified;” Matthew describes them as “overcome by fear.” This was exactly the way their first readers were feeling and, let’s face it, many of us are feeling too. And for the same reason: Authoritarian overreach. Jesus’ first words to his disciples during their mountain top experience -“Do not be afraid” is meant to prepare them to courageously face all that would come both before and “after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” But this comes with a warning for those fearful then and us fearful now. This mountaintop experience wasn’t enough! It didn’t work! In Gethsemane’s Garden, Pilate’s court, and on Golgotha’s hill, these three mountaintop experiencers were the first to flee – with Peter as a three-time, vehement denier - just to save their own skin. As we resolve to act boldly to resist oppression, we need to heed this warning too! Mountain top experiences are not enough! When we, like these three, are face-to-face with the wielders of overwhelming power, we need something more; and because we know the rest of Peter, James, and John’s story, we know exactly what that something more is: First, the assurance of forgiveness for fearfulness; of God’s affirmation of, and not rejection of, our frail humanity. That’s the lively use of John’s assertion, “The Word became flesh and dwells among us.” That’s the body of this meal of Christ’s body and blood.

And that leads us to this story’s third purpose: enlivening worship. Enlivening worship is what this assembly us all about. Yet both then and now, enlivening worship must not be tied to a physical structure, be it Jerusalem’s Temple, or this nave or Memorial Drives’ sanctuary, or Peter’s “three tents.” By the time the evangelists wrote their gospels, Jerusalem’s Temple was a pile of rubble, leveled by the same Roman gestapo that crucified Jesus. The first gospel readers were stunned by that catastrophe. Where could they go to experience enlivening worship? How would God give them that needed “something more”? In response to that question, God gave them, and gives us, the exact something more we need. A portable religion using the most common of things – Word, water, bread, and wine – and people so closely bound to each other by God that God calls them – calls us – the Body of Christ. Through these simple elements, God forgives our fearfulness and fuels us for fearlessness so we can stand freely and firmly for others against all so-called overwhelming evil, as those transformed into nothing less than the bold and courageous Body of the crucified and risen Christ. All of which answers the first question. For you see, Transfiguration didn’t just happen. Transfiguration always happens for us, to us, and through us for the good of the world. So that, amidst all overwhelming danger, we hear Jesus say, “Do not be afraid.” And not just hear it but live it.