

# The Transfiguration of Our Lord

## Exodus 24:8-18; Matthew 17:1-9

February 19, 2023



### Clouds and Mountains

Dear brothers and sisters: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we heard in the Book of Exodus that Moses went up a mountain. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew we also heard that Jesus went up on a mountain. While on the mountain Moses was enveloped in a cloud. While on the mountain Jesus also was enveloped in a cloud. Moses came back down the mountain and brought the people of Israel all the ordinances that God wanted them to receive in order that they could be made holy and be His people.

Jesus came down off the mountain and brought the Word of His impending death and resurrection to the disciples, which they had heard before, and in that Word was the very promise of reconciliation, forgiveness, and hope. On the cross Jesus would shed His blood as the once and for all sacrificed needed for holiness. So it's no wonder we are hearing of how Moses went up Mt.

Sinai to receive the Law for this festival of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

There are many similarities. But Jesus is not a new Moses. Rather, Jesus is the

fulfillment of the Law of Moses, and the fulfillment of the prophets like Elijah, Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that had come before Him.

Let's get back to a basic starting point that is made clear throughout the Holy Scriptures. Let's start with righteousness. Let's start with an understanding of holiness. Righteousness and holiness are how we describe the Lord God, maker of heaven and earth. One day Moses encounters the very presence of the Lord at the burning bush, and the Lord says to him, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."<sup>1</sup> God is holy. The people and Moses also sang this song together after they had been delivered from Pharaoh at the Red Sea: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"<sup>2</sup> Holy, awesome, majestic.

But the problem, you see, is the flip side of this holiness and righteousness of the Lord. It's not a problem for the Lord God, it's a problem for sinful humanity. It's a problem for all of us. For He cannot be in the presence of anything that is not like He is, holy and righteous. Not because He's picky, like some kind of prima donna who won't condescend to be around anything less than His lofty standards. It's much simpler than that. And it's much more serious. Because God can't be in the presence of anything that is not

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<sup>1</sup> Ex 3:5.

<sup>2</sup> Ex 15:11.

holy and righteous, then to be in His presence without that holiness and righteousness means sure and certain destruction. Not because God is bitter and spiteful, like we are, but because of who He is. It wasn't meant to be this way, of course. God the Father Almighty created heaven and earth and all that is in it and pronounced it good. He created man in His image, and pronounced him good. But we know what happened, sin reared its ugly head and ever since then the world is broken, and we are lacking in the holiness and righteousness that God has intended for us to have. And now God is dangerous to us, we know He is dangerous because His Holy Law shows us just what we are lacking. He is not casual. He is not like a nice grandfather. He feeds the sparrows, He brings the spring rains; yet earthquakes and pandemics are also in His hand. We get the sense of this in our Introit today: "The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble!"

So in our Old Testament reading the Lord God beckons Moses to go up the mountain to receive the things that He wants the people to have, in order that they might regain the holiness they so desperately need to be in right relationship with God. The Lord has called Moses into this office in order to do just this. We heard that before he starts the ascent up Mt. Sinai he throws blood on the people, and in doing so he marks them as consecrated, set apart, by God, and ready to receive what Moses will eventually bring them. And

then Moses goes up Mt. Sinai part way, with Aaron and some of Aaron's helpers. From that spot they can see where God is, but they are certainly not in His presence. Remember, that would be dangerous. Then Moses went up a ways further with his right-hand man, Joshua. But in the end, only Moses entered the cloud which is, at the same time, a consuming fire—the cloud which is glory of Lord. “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.”<sup>3</sup> Only after God specifically calls him into the cloud does Moses enter into God's glory on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. We see how the narrative is presented very deliberately, that we should know all of these details. Only Moses, whom God has chosen, is able to enter the cloud.

What's going on up there? On the mountain God gave to Moses all the ordinances surrounding the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the Divine Service, even down to what the priests should be wearing when they are serving the Lord. So the next big chunk of the Book of Exodus that starts after our reading deals with what happened after Moses came down off of Mt. Sinai. Moses begins to deliver these goods, in the stead and by the command of the Lord. And the reason why God gives all these things to Moses is so that the

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<sup>3</sup> Ex 24:15–16.

people might be able to get rid of all the things that made them unclean, and then to be able to stand in God's presence. And this is not just one and done. The need the people have to be renewed and to receive God's gifts never ends. We see that in Exodus chapter 32 when they create and worship a golden calf, even after everything God has done for them, even after Moses has brought them the means by which God's holiness can go out and cleanse them from their sins. God does this for them through Moses because there can be no thought of direct access to God—in fact, the one time when God did speak to the people, at the giving of the Ten Commandments, the people were terrified and called out in fear. So God must provide a way. And He did. And it happened on a mountain, and appeared in a cloud.

Now we fast forward about 1,400 years to the earthly ministry of Jesus. And here again God provides a way for His people. Only this time, God does not call a normal man like Moses to come and be the earthly mediator. And this time God does not send out His ordinances in order that the people might receive His gifts. This time the Lord God actually comes in the flesh, He becomes one of us, the ones who are in desperate need of God's holiness and righteousness. The ones who need the forgiveness of sins, and life, and salvation. Throughout the season of Epiphany we have been hearing about this wonderful turn of events in human history, that "the Word became flesh

and dwelt among us.”<sup>4</sup> This is the Christ. This is the mediator we need, for He will take away our sins by dying on a cross. Jesus was appointed to His office, for at His Baptism “he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” And Jesus “was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house.”<sup>5</sup> The writer of Hebrews helps us understand the connection I am making this morning between Exodus and the Transfiguration: “For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son.”<sup>6</sup> On the mountain that day with Peter and James and John, and indeed with Moses and Elijah, the Glory of the Lord is once again revealed. It is once again revealed on a mountain. It is once again revealed in a cloud that descends on the mountain. But now the Glory of the Lord is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who shines brightly in His Glory. And so that we know that He is God’s own Son, again “a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am

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4 Jn 1:14.

5 Heb 3:2.

6 Heb 3:3–6.

well pleased; listen to him.”<sup>7</sup>

On the day of His Transfiguration the dullness of earth is stripped away and now heaven is revealed. “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”<sup>8</sup> The disciples are there, Moses and Elijah are there, for now Christ brings them in to the presence of the Glory of the Lord without danger. But it only lasts for a moment, and then Jesus and the disciples are coming back down off the mountain. Like Moses, Jesus brings a Word when He comes down from the mountain. “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”<sup>9</sup> But again, the Word that Jesus speaks is new and better, these are not new ordinances, Jesus is not the new Law giver. Jesus is the final Word, He speaks of God’s ultimate plan for the salvation of His people to be revealed when Jesus is glorified in the lifting up of the cross, and then raised from the darkness of the tomb in victory. This is not the first time Jesus has told the disciples of what awaits in Jerusalem on that hill called Calvary. Right before the account of the Transfiguration St. Matthew tells us: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”<sup>10</sup> It’s a message they struggle with, and

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7 Mt 17:5.

8 Mt 17:2.

9 Mt 17:9.

10 Mt 16:21.

Jesus would keep repeating, practically all the way to Good Friday.

And so this Divine Declaration comes at a moment when the disciples are struggling with what Jesus has told them. They must come to grips that His kingdom is not of this world, and the way into His kingdom will be death on a cross. What about you this morning? Perhaps the Divine Declaration that is the Christ lands on you in the same way. Perhaps you are struggling to come to grips with the implications of the Christian faith, that everything in this life might not go according to your own wishes and ideas, but instead that the life Christ calls you to is one of cross bearing and trial. Even still, the Glory of the Lord comes today for you. He comes in His Word and in His Sacrament, and He comes so that you might have faith, and forgiveness, and now can stand before a holy and righteous God clothed in the spotless garment that Jesus gives in your Baptism. And this also is not one and done. These gifts are given anew in daily repentance, and the Holy Spirit works through His means of grace to strengthen and nurture that which He has created.

The Glory of the Lord is awesome. It is also terrifying. “Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”<sup>11</sup> And then at the Transfiguration: “When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.”<sup>12</sup> But then Jesus comes to them, and He touches them, and

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<sup>11</sup> Heb 12:21.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 17:6.



says ““Rise, and have no fear.”<sup>13</sup> The encounter with the Glory of the Lord is the chance to regain the rightful sense of the fear of God, and the same encounter is the chance for us to experience the touch of forgiveness. In a sense this is journey that lies ahead for these upcoming 40 days of Lent, one of penitential devotion and preparation. And so as we journey together as God’s people into this important time of the Church year let us remember: if the people of Israel who were wandering around the wilderness needed a mediator appointed to approach the presence of God on their behalf, then how much greater is our need, we who have access to the new covenant, His very Body and Blood, and how much greater is our mediator, Jesus Christ, the very Son of God. So “see that you do not refuse him who is speaking.”<sup>14</sup> Listen to Him, for His Words are the Gospel unto everlasting life. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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✠ Soli Deo Gloria

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13 Mt 17:7–8.

14 Heb 12:25.