

Jesu Juva

“Near Death or Real Death?”

Text: Luke 9:28-36

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

They saw a bright light. They heard voices. They saw people from long ago. They felt joy and wanted to stay. They were far from the troubles and problems of the world. It was a good place to be. But they couldn't stay. They had to go back.

Is that a description of the Transfiguration of our Lord we heard about today? I suppose it is. But I was really describing what you will read almost universally in books and articles written by people who have what are called *near death experiences*. People die, or almost die I suppose, and report all those things. I don't think I've ever heard of one in which the person experiences fire and brimstone, darkness and fear. It is always good, it is always joy, it is always a place you want to be. And these books and articles are quite popular and capture people's imaginations, even Christians, who often see in them evidence of heaven. Someone's been there, someone's seen it, so now we know it's true.

But . . . *so what?* Seriously, so what? I knew that heaven was true already because of another book that told us so (the Bible!), and another person who's been there and told us about it (Jesus!). So all these books and articles really don't say anything new. Instead, in fact, they leave a lot out. Because just because something is true, doesn't mean it's **for you**.

I've seen people who have millions of dollars - that's true, that's real, *but it's not for me*. I saw Joe Flacco bask in the glory of winning the Super Bowl MVP last Sunday night - that's true, that's real, *but it's not for me*. Barack Obama was sworn in again as president a couple of weeks ago to the adoration of hundreds of thousands of people - that was true and real, *but it's not for me*. So someone, purportedly, dies or almost dies and sees these things. Real? Maybe, maybe not. *But what about me? What's going to happen to me?*

And that, those questions right there, is what separates the Transfiguration of our Lord from all those *near death experiences* that sound very similar. For the Transfiguration, you see, is *for you*. It's not just something that happened to Peter, James, and John, a *near death experience*, which they then told us about. The

Transfiguration, as we prayed earlier, *foreshows our adoption by grace*. The glory, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the voice from the cloud - it's all for you. That you may know not only that heaven is real because someone died and went to heaven, **but because someone came from heaven to die for you**. That rather than rely on someone else's *near death experience*, you rely on Jesus' *real death experience* - His death and resurrection for you. His death and resurrection that we are now entering into the season of Lent to remember and celebrate.

And so in the Transfiguration we see and hear of *the One who came from heaven to die for you*. **Jesus appears in His glory**. He is no mere man, no mere mortal, no mere prophet or miracle worker, but the very Son of God come down from heaven. He pulls aside, as it were, the veil of His human flesh to show that glory that is always His and that He always has, though it was hidden, for a time, in human flesh.

And that He *came to die* is the topic of the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, for they were ***speaking of [Jesus'] departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem***. For how Jesus would *depart* from Jerusalem is carrying a cross, then be hung on that cross, and then have His lifeless body taken down from that cross and laid in a tomb. This is the message that Moses and Elijah had proclaimed during their earthly lives, and what they were now beginning to see fulfilled in Jesus.

Now those two things - Jesus' shining glory and this talk of His death on the cross - seem, at first, contradictory. What Peter, James, and John were *seeing* and what they were *hearing* didn't agree. Their eyes saw glory but their ears heard horror. And if you had to choose between those two options, you would have chosen the first as Peter did. Glory . . . crucifixion . . . um, *let's stay here!* ***Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah***.

So then comes the voice from the cloud to set things straight; the voice of the Father sounds forth: ***This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him! This is my glorious Son - God from God, Light from Light, very God of very God; my Chosen One*** - chosen by the Father to die for the sin of the world; ***listen to Him*** - for what your eyes see and what your ears hear may seem contradictory to you, but they are not to God. This has been the plan from before the foundation of the world (Mt 13:35; Eph 1:4; 1 Pt 1:20; Rev 13:8): that your glorious God would suffer the horror of death on the cross; that your glorious God would die the death of a sinner, so that you sinners would live the glorious life of God.

And then the glory was gone. ***Jesus was found alone***. It was gone as quickly as it came. *Or was it?* No, the glory was there, it *always* was there - it was just hidden again. Hidden for Jesus to die.

And again, that's what separates the Transfiguration of our Lord from all those *near death experiences* that sound very familiar. For them, the glory is the story. For Jesus, the glory is a part of the story that *helps us understand* the story. That we see that the glory and the cross are not contradictory, but go together. That we see that Jesus was never more glorious as when He hung on the cross, in love, as your substitute. That we see that for Jesus, His glory was not something to show off, but to use for the life of the world. That His glory wouldn't just be His glory, but your glory too.

For the fire and brimstone, the darkness and fear are real. They are, in fact, what you and I, Moses and Elijah, and every person who ever lived deserve. For our sin. For our sin that tells God what I want matters more than what You want. For our sin that tells God that we know better than Him what we need and what we should have. For our sin that tells God we love our stuff and our pleasures and the dying, decaying things of this world more than Him. To which God by all rights should say: *Fine. Go.* But when you then have a *real death experience*, it won't be of the glory kind . . .

But here we see true love - that instead of telling us: *Fine. Go*, the Father told His Son: **GO!** Go into the world and save them. Go into the world and pay the price for their sins. Go into the world that they may have a glorious future with Me. Go into the world and show them My love.

And maybe that's what confused the disciples most of all - not the glory, but the love. This love that transcends all earthly love. This love this doesn't make earthly sense. This love that would cause God to die for sinners like you and me. Is that not the glory of God?

And so when the disciples finally did proclaim Jesus, when they filled the world with their message, when they wrote books and letters, they told the story of the Transfiguration, yes, but more - *far more!* - they told the story of the cross. That if you want to see the glory of God, look there. If you want to see the love of God, look there. For by the cross, not Jesus, but you will be transfigured. By the cross, Jesus will provide His glory for you in the forgiveness of your sins.

And then the disciples told us even more. For when they filled the world with their message, when they wrote their books and letters, they not only told the story of the cross, they told us where this cross is for us today.

That in **Holy Baptism** Jesus joins you to Himself in His death and resurrection, that His death to sin be your death to sin, and His resurrection to life be your resurrection to life.

That in **Holy Absolution**, the words that Jesus spoke to the criminal on the cross next to Him are the words that Jesus speaks to the sinner in the seat where you are sitting. *I forgive you all your sins.* And know that those words are just as true now as they were then.

That in the **Holy Gospel**, you hear not just the story of others who happened to live at the same time as Jesus and saw His glory - you hear the very words of Jesus spoken to you, and so are ***listening to Him.***

And that in the **Holy Supper**, the very same Body and Blood of Jesus that hung on the cross and lay in the tomb and rose victorious, is now given to you, that your body do the same.

And that these things and the church they are given in don't look very glorious? And that the people they are given to don't look very glorious? *Well, that's kind of the point, isn't it?* As with Jesus, it's not that the glory isn't there, it is just hidden for a while. Hidden until the time comes for it to be revealed.

So what does a *near death experience* look like for us Christians? It looks like what you do here every Sunday. When you repent and receive the glorious forgiveness of your sins. When you hear the glorious life-giving Word of Jesus. When you open your mouth and receive His glorious Body and Blood. When that old man, that old sinner in you dies, and the new, glorious man in you rises again. To live a new life. A new, glorious life that will be hidden under trials and struggles, sufferings and pain, just as it was with Jesus. But like the disciples, don't rely on your eyes, ***listen to Him.*** To Him who says: *you are mine.* To Him who says: *these things are yours for a time, for your good.* To Him who has shown us that *hidden* doesn't mean *absent*; it means that the glory really is there. Yes, now in you. For Christ lives in you.

So we enter soon, this week, into the season of Lent. As you do, as you feel the scratch of the ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday, as you feel the darkness on Good Friday, these things telling you: *No life for you, sinner! No heaven for you, sinner! No glory for you, sinner!* Remember that this is exactly why Jesus is here for you. To be in your sin and death with you and for you and to say: *Yes, my child, life for you! Yes, heaven for you! Yes, glory for you, my child! Yes, for you.*

So now come. Let us see His glory. The glory of His cross.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.