

Sermon – Luke 9:28-36  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Transfiguration – Year C  
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### “Light It Up”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As far as mountaintops go, it was mediocre. The Courtyard by Marriott in South Bend, IN, is not going to become a destination for spiritual pilgrims any time soon. Still, it was good to be there. After all, its lobby-level store sold Funyuns and dry ramen. Its high-speed wi-fi enabled me to Zoom back into the real world for appointments and meetings. Best of all, I was there with Greta, enjoying some father-daughter bonding time as she and her teammates played in a hockey tournament. I could have stayed there a bit longer. Checking out was bittersweet. It’s good to retreat from day-to-day life, to escape the world in meaningful if not luxurious manner. Even mediocre mountaintops have their pleasures. Fortunately for me, my descent down one mountain has brought me up another, for I’m back today with all of you. I’m happy enough to be back, but whether in South Bend or here, part of me wishes I could remain where everything is good, easy, pleasant.
2. The fact of the matter, however, is that this escape really wasn’t. For even though I was watching a hotel television instead of my own, I was, like you, watching the news out of Ukraine. Seeing the images. Hearing the heartbreaking tale of humanity’s depravity and degradation. A week ago, we hoped it was nothing worse than grandstanding and brinksmanship. Surely Vladimir Putin would not actually launch a full-scale assault on Ukraine. By the time we went to bed on Wednesday, such hopes had proved illusory.

Land war has returned to Europe. Vague threats of nuclear aggression have been invoked. Meanwhile, images emerge of ordinary people taking up arms to defend themselves against a superior foreign army – grandfathers and newlyweds and young women who are schoolteachers, not soldiers. We do not know where this will lead, but we know already that children have been killed. Kids, perhaps, not so different from those I watched play hockey these last few days. We wonder how this can happen, how it can happen again. We wish to go up the mountain, and to bring these dear ones with us to safety.

3. We are taken up the mountain today, walking with Peter, James, and John, just a few steps behind Jesus. Is there a word for us in this moment? Here, on the mountaintop, we not only find respite from the violent valleys below us; more importantly, we find Jesus. Here, more is revealed to us about who he is and why he has come. A few things: Luke tell us that Jesus goes up the mountain to pray. Prayer has fallen out of fashion in our world today, and perhaps fairly so when prayers and thoughts are offered instead of action. But when we pray with and to this Jesus who is transfigured on the mountaintop, prayer *is* action. For what is prayer if not the opening of oneself to be aligned to God's purposes for us in this world. Within the darkness, prayer is a primary way we stay connected to the hope we have in Christ.
4. And that's just it: the hope we have in Christ. For this One we see on the mountaintop is no ordinary person, nor even a leader or prophet like Moses or Elijah. This Jesus transfigured before us is revealed to the disciples as the One in whom the light ever shines. The One, indeed, who is the very Light of this world. It is true that while he walks the dusty byways of Galilee, the majesty of God is veiled in his human flesh. Veiled, but not gone. Today, we are reminded that this Jesus, this Light, is One we can trust; the Christ to whom we can turn. In him do we find the culmination of Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet, for in him is the fulness of God.

5. Peter's reaction, of course, is perfectly understandable. "It is good for us to be here," says. How true! How good to be in the presence of Jesus, shot through with the glory of the divine. This is no mediocre mountaintop; it's the real deal. Of course they should build dwellings and stay awhile! Why check out so soon? Jesus makes no response, but the voice from the cloud breaks the silence: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Even then, Jesus does not speak. Neither does anyone else. The scene fades. Moses and Elijah are nowhere to be found. They walk back down the mountain, into the darkness of the valley below. Peter wants to remain, but Jesus' mission compels him to continue to Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there.
  
6. Why doesn't Jesus speak? This is question that wells up in our hearts in moments of uncertainty and fear. Why doesn't Jesus speak? Why doesn't God act? In this text, perhaps the first thing to note is that perhaps Jesus does not respond to Peter because Jesus agrees with him. It *is* good to be there on the mountain, to find rest and release from all that would chain and claim us in the valley below. It is good to be in the presence of Christ. But the presence of Christ does not remain only on the mountain. I read an article this week in which the author writes that this was the only moment in the gospels in which Jesus makes no response to someone who speaks directly to him. That didn't sound right to me, however, and it turns out it's not. Later, Jesus will stand before Pontius Pilate, agent of tyranny and empire. Jesus will be asked to respond to the charges set forth before him. But Jesus will give no answer, not to a single charge, Matthew tells us. Jesus is silent in the brightness of transfiguration and in the shadows of the Passion. This is, I think, because when Jesus, the Word of God, wants to speak most clearly, he doesn't use words. He instead points to the cross. Jesus, transfigured before us, is crucified for us. But his Light cannot be so easily extinguished.
  
7. This past Friday, Grace's Religion in Literature group met to discuss J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Some of us had read it many times

before; others were coming to the book for the first time. It wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but I think we all found hope in a central theme of the story: that ordinary people can face extraordinary darkness and respond by doing the right thing, even when it is the hard thing. At a turning point in the quest, the Lady Galadriel gives a gift to Frodo, the story's unassuming hero. The gift is a small crystal phial in which is caught the light of their most precious star. With the gift come these words: "It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, perhaps had the Transfiguration in mind when we wrote this passage. We face incredible darkness in our world, and the night seems deeper in these days. The long arm of empire is seeking to extend its reach through violence, evil, and terror. But we are not without hope, and we are not without light. Jesus journeys with us as we follow him, responding to hatred with love, violence with peace. In him and to him, we pray without ceasing.

8. It is good to be on the mountaintop. But now we journey to the cross. Today, Moses and Elijah speak of Jesus' impending departure. That word, however, would be better translated as "exodus." Like Moses before him, Jesus prepares an exodus for the people. For us, and for all people who live under the veil of sin and suffering, of idolatry and empire, Jesus prepares an exodus. It will not happen on this mountain but through the cross, by which the powers of this world will be overwhelmed, finally and fully, by the love and self-sacrifice of our God. In the power of that love will we be brought to the mountain that is anything but mediocre, for there shall we feast. There will God swallow up death forever. In that hope, let us cast off the veil. Having seen the Light, what darkness can we not face? Friends, it is good to be here in the presence of Jesus Christ. Know that he, the Light whom no darkness can overcome, journeys back into the world with you to light your way. May we pray for, and stand with, the people of Ukraine and, indeed, with all people in all places who suffer under tyranny, war, and violence. May we

pray for those who present themselves as enemies. May the peace that can come only from Christ burst forth in dazzling brightness upon the nations of this world. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.