

Sermon – Mark 9:2-9
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Grace Lutheran Church
Transfiguration – Year B
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“Only Jesus”

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

1. Until we moved here nine years ago, I had never spent much time in the Chicago area. Even though I grew up just three hours north of here, our family travels usually took us west, or, if we were travelling east or south, my dad would insist on leaving in the dead of night so as to hit Chicago well before rush hour was getting underway. But once a year we would make the pilgrimage to Gurnee, to Great America, back when it was run by Marriott. I am not, however, a big fan of roller coasters. Nowadays, they have those cameras that capture you mid-ride, right? I’m never the person in the picture who looks like he’s having fun. Usually something more like *this*. As a child, the brand-new ride was the American Eagle, that giant wooden coaster. Many of you have ridden its tracks, slowly making your way up that initial incline, the structure feeling more rickety every second. When you reach the top there’s a moment that seems to endure forever. You stop. The world stops. It might be kind of nice to stay there. And then it’s over, as you plunge 147 feet, reaching a speed of 66 miles per hour. Why do we do this? Whenever I was at the top, in that long-seeming moment, I always kinda just wanted to stay there. Not because it was so nice at the top, but because I dreaded making the ride down.
2. With Peter, James, and John, we make our slow way up the mountain today. And there, in a moment that they want to last forever, everything changes. In

- fact, they witness a change beyond change, which is what our word for the day means. Transfiguration. From the Greek, the word usually yields the English metamorphosis, the changing of something into something else, perhaps evoking for us Kafkaesque thoughts. But here, on the mountain, the metamorphic change is not grotesque but beautiful beyond words. Jesus is transfigured, the light of divinity emerging from within. In his presence, suddenly, are Moses and Elijah. In this moment of clarity, we see that the Law and the prophets find their fulfillment in Jesus, and that Jesus is now enough. As God has spoken through others to God's people throughout the years, God now speaks directly through the Word that is Jesus. Listen to him! Peter and the others want to stay on the mountain. Why wouldn't they? It is good, Lord, to be here. No doubt this is because of the joy and the peace of the moment, but I wonder if it isn't as much fear of what it would mean to go back down.
3. We have glimpses of this moment in our own lives, mountaintops on which we'd like to stay. Frederick Buechner writes of this in *Whistling in the Dark*, of how it happens to all of us, "sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in, or just having a beer at a Saturday baseball game in July. Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing." So true and so, if we have even a fraction of this in our own lives, why wouldn't we want to stay in the presence of Christ on the mountaintop? It's important to note here that these moments in our lives have only so much in common with what happens to Jesus. The difference is not only in degree but in kind. On the mountaintop, we see Jesus not simply having a beautiful experience, nor even a moment of spiritual power with the divine. Instead, we see the divine reality bursting forth from him. He *is* the divine reality. The Transfiguration is profoundly christological. The disciples are to know, we are to know, the full identity of the One who walks back down the mountain, calling us to follow him, urging us to listen. The One who goes down into the darkness is

the very light and life of God, veiled in truly human flesh but no less truly divine.

4. Jesus did not come into this world to stay on the mountain. Having left the joys of heaven, he is all in with us, all the way down. Just before today's passage, six days earlier, Jesus had revealed to his friends what awaits him at the bottom of the mountain, at journey's end in Jerusalem. It's no wonder his friends don't really want to go, not with him toward suffering and death. But that's where they need him. That's where we need him. As we pause in the fresh, clear air before making the downward plunge toward the dustiness of Ash Wednesday, we are already well aware of our own mortality. Death has been a too-constant companion at Grace in these days. The walls of the valley have obstructed the sun. But today we see the even-brighter-shining Son who promises to lead us through this valley and, finally, out the other side.

5. Today, as the light fades away, Jesus bids us once more to follow him. It is a hard thing, just as it was a hard thing for Elisha to follow Elijah. But it is the only way forward. We know that the glory of God is most fully revealed in the cross of Christ, the cross upon which death itself meets its end and the tomb now opening up unto life now forever. We go back down the mountain, for that is where the world needs us. We go, proclaiming Christ alone and shining light into darkness. But first, today, we pause. Not in fear of going back down but because it *is* good, Lord, to be here. Here in the presence of the One who reveals his glory to us: Jesus, the Son, the Beloved, the One who is with us always. Amen.

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