

"Three Men in the Cloud, but Only One on the Cross"

Text: 2 Kings 2:1-12

May the light of the glorified Christ, once seen through the eyes of his chosen disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, fill your heart with wonder and excitement, for a similar transformation has even now begun in each one of us. That change is visible even now to God, but will remain invisible to man until the coming of our Lord Jesus on Judgment Day. Amen.

Dear Fellow Bondservants of that same Lord Jesus:

Since it is Transfiguration Sunday, we know that we stand at the threshold of the Lenten season. The Transfiguration of our Lord was the special strengthening that Jesus received from his Father before he began the final leg of his tortured journey to the cross. (An account of this event is recorded in our Gospel Lesson in Mark 9:2-9.) We are mistaken if we imagine that Jesus – since he was true God as well as true man – did not have many of the same needs as any other human being. He did. The difference is that Jesus practiced preventative spiritual medicine; that is, he tended to his spiritual needs *before* he found himself in spiritual crisis.

The Bible tells us, for example, how Jesus spent even an entire night in prayer. He himself studied the Old Testament from his childhood, and then used that Word that he had committed to memory to answer the temptations of Satan. Already at the age of 12 he was **"about his Father's business."** Jesus practiced what he preached when it came to **"seeking first the kingdom of God."**

Yet the stress of bearing the world's sins was infinitely beyond what any of us have ever experienced. The Transfiguration was a special strengthening before the last terrible days of Jesus' suffering. But the transfiguration was even more than a special support for Jesus. It was also intended for you and me. We know that this is true from the fact that Jesus invited witnesses. Jesus could just as well have left all of his men behind, but he didn't. Why? Because he wanted that glorified picture of himself to help sustain his disciples in the long dark days that lay ahead. Through their witness, Jesus wanted this spectacular vision *to sustain you and me as well*. This glorified image would temper and offset the terrible, debilitating spectacle of his trial and crucifixion. It would serve to shore up Jesus' disciples and to help direct their focus toward the spectacular events that lay in their future. He wants it to do the same for each one of us.

All of which tells us that we would do well to carefully consider this event from time to time. The light that shone from our Savior at the Transfiguration was intended to fill us with comfort and eager expectation, even when all in our world seems dark and hopeless.

With these thoughts and this vision fresh in our minds, we turn to our text for this morning, which gives some of the background on one of those present at the Transfiguration – the Prophet Elijah. When we learn more about Elijah, we will learn more about the Transfiguration. The text that will so instruct us is found in the Book of 2 Kings, the Second Chapter:

^{ESV} **2 Kings 2:1-12** *Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² And Elijah said to Elisha, "Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. ³ And the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he said, "Yes, I know it; keep quiet." ⁴ Elijah said to him, "Elisha, please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. ⁵ The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from over you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know it; keep quiet." ⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Please stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. ⁷ Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸ Then Elijah took his cloak and rolled it up and struck the water, and the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. ⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me." ¹⁰ And he said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you, but if you do not see me, it shall not be so." ¹¹ And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² And Elisha saw it and he cried, "My father, my father! The*

chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

These are the verbally inspired words of our God. Allow no doubt or uncertainty to taint your trust in that fact, for these words are true and right altogether. With unwavering confidence in the truth as it has been delivered to us from our God, we pray, ***"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

There is, believe it or not, a danger in reading our Bibles. The threat is our natural inclination to allow our minds to mold or explain God's Word, rather than the other way around. In 1628 a Swedish warship (the Vasa) was launched. At the time, it was the largest and most extravagant warship ever built, and it sailed only 20 miles before it capsized and sank. For centuries scholars debated why, only recently discovering that the ship's carpenters were using different units of measure. Some of the carpenters were basing their measurements on a Swedish foot, which was divided into 12 inches, and others were using an Amsterdam foot, which was divided into 11 inches. The result was that the final product was much heavier on the port side of the ship. The ship was also inordinately top-heavy. Because it was the first ship ever built with two decks of guns, the ship's designer made everything on the gun decks much heavier than it needed to be. The ship was therefore doomed before construction even began.

Much the same dangers threaten us each time we open our Bibles. Just as it didn't matter how carefully those shipwrights measured and cut (because their basic unit of measure was faulty and because what they were trying to build was fatally flawed) so also it doesn't matter how carefully we read and study our Bibles *if we are operating under false assumptions and if our vision of the final product or result is faulty*. We are supposed to approach God's Word as erased tablets, with the expectation that God himself will "fill us in"; that is, that God's Word will write on or in our hearts his divine truth. Yet that is not nearly so easy as it might sound. Each of us comes to God with hearts and minds full of our own ideas and misconceptions, and the problem is exponentially compounded by the fact that we can usually mentally manipulate God's Word to make it agree with us. If, for example, you open your Bible with the preconceived notion that Jesus was not true God, it will be no great challenge to there confirm that false understanding and to dismiss all of the clear passages to the contrary. The same tragic result occurs no matter what the error and no matter how clearly God's Word refutes that error – the delusion is that powerful. That's why even so-called Christian denominations can claim the Bible as their only guide and norm, but still deny basic Biblical truths like

the virgin birth, salvation by grace through faith alone, 6-day creation, the resurrection, God's timeless definition of marriage, and all the rest. God's Word doesn't take them there, the mind of man does.

Here's how that problem can and has tainted something like the Transfiguration. When human beings read that Moses and Elijah appeared in the cloud with Jesus, the natural question is *why?* Why Moses and Elijah, and not others? Faulty human logic suggests that since they appear alive, that probably means they never died – which is supported by our text for this morning. Elijah never died. The problem, of course, is Deuteronomy 34:5-7: ***"So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, ⁶ and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. ⁷ Moses was 120 years old when he died."*** Rather than accept what God's Word says, some simply deny that Moses actually died in order to arrive at their desired destination. The result is not only that they believe something that is not true, they also rob themselves of ever learning the truth because their search has ended and their minds made up. Having heard and seen all that they wanted, they cover their eyes and plug their ears and so shut out any further instruction from the Holy Spirit in his Word.

There are other examples of this same spiritually crippling phenomenon in our text. If I were to ask you how Elijah was carried to heaven, how would you answer? Despite what is clearly written here, a disturbing number of Christians believe that Elijah was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot. Yet our text says that he was carried away by a whirlwind, and that the fiery chariots (there was more than one) and horses simply separated Elijah and Elisha, apparently so that both would not be carried away by the whirlwind. You can see the problem here, can't you? People ride in chariots, therefore that image is much more natural to imagine – and suddenly we can see nothing else, no matter what the words themselves tell us. The problem is therefore not with God's Word, which is clear, but with us.

Another example from our text. When Elijah was being carried away, Elisha cried out, ***"My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"*** What did he mean by those words? Most believe that Elisha was rather stupidly stating the obvious, that he was simply and pointlessly identifying what he saw: ***"Look, Elijah! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"*** Makes sense, except for the fact that they *weren't* Israel's chariots and horsemen, were they? They were God's. In fact the first part of our text leaves no doubt that Elisha knew in advance

that God was going to carry Elijah away on that very day. Two different groups of prophets said as much to him, and both times he replied with **"Yes, I know it; keep quiet."** What then was Elisha saying?

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Israel believed that their power and preservation lay in their military might, rather than in their God. In other words, they trusted *"the chariots of Israel, and its horsemen."* Elisha, the man of God, recognized that the only thing that stood between his nation and annihilation was God himself. He therefore saw his master, Elijah (the prophet of God) as Israel's great hope. His cry was therefore not a mindless observation of what he saw, but a cry of anguish: *"My father, my father! You are the chariots of Israel, and its horsemen!"* In other words, *"This is a disaster! God is our only refuge and strength, and his prophet is now being taken from us!"*

Elisha was both right and wrong. He was absolutely right in believing that God alone could protect and provide for his people, but he was wrong in imagining that that divine protection could only be provided through Elijah. Elijah was not *"the chariots of Israel, and its horsemen"*; Jesus was, and is. Even those Jews who believed that *"God was their refuge and strength"* erred badly in their misunderstanding of the sort of rescue God had planned. Many trusted in God's Law, as delivered through Moses – believing that they could earn their way to heaven by keeping that Law. Others believed that the Promised Messiah would usher in his kingdom through "chariot and horsemen" (military) might, and establish a secular, earthly kingdom. They came to see Moses (who delivered to them God's Law) as their "law savior" and Elijah (who had violently slain the Priests of Baal) as their "sword savior."

What they needed, and what God gave them, is Jesus Christ. It is no coincidence therefore that in that Transfiguration cloud we see Moses and Elijah. Neither represented a solution to man's greatest need, let alone a savior. Both were in the cloud, but neither was on the cross. Both pointed always and only to the need for Jesus Christ. That same Jesus said in Luke 16:16: ***"The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached."*** Moses and Elijah represented ***"the Law and the Prophets"*** – neither of which could save fallen mankind. Jesus alone could remove the sin that barred our entrance into heaven. The Holy Spirit through Paul put it this way to the Christians in Rome: ***"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short***

of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

In that Transfiguration cloud then see Moses and Elijah, but see also exactly what it is they are actually doing there. There they point not to themselves but to Jesus Christ as man's only Savior. Though Moses and Elijah faithfully performed their duties during their time of grace, those efforts had no power to save. Their work always and only pointed to Jesus. Jesus alone cancelled our sin-debt by carrying it to the cross. See, understand, and believe.

Know also that the image of our glorified Savior is how we are to think of him now. We do not now pray to the weak, humbled, and tortured Jesus of the cross but to the all-powerful King of kings and Lord of lords – that One to whom all power, in heaven and on earth, has been given. Seeing him as he truly now is will erase any and all doubt that, having solved our most terrible sin-problem, he is even now able to preserve, protect, and provide for every one of needs – physical and spiritual – until he calls us home. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **2 Corinthians 3:12-18** Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ¹³ not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

ESV **Mark 9:2-9** And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. ⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mark Johnson, President Eileen McEnroe, Head Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor Today's Organist: Angela Pfennig

Transfiguration Sunday – February 11, 2018

The Opening Hymn – 135 *(Red Hymnal)*

"'Tis Good Lord to Be Here"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The First Lesson: (2 Corinthians 3:12-18) This morning is Transfiguration Sunday. Two men appeared with Jesus in the bright cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration: Moses and Elijah. Our first reading speaks of the inadequacies of Moses to solve the spiritual problems of the Jews. Paul here describes all attempts to earn heaven through the keeping of the Law of Moses as futility that envelops their hearts as with a veil. Faith alone in Jesus Christ removes that veil.

Psalm 2 (Supplement page 30)

The Gospel Lesson: (Mark 9:2-9) Our Gospel reading is Mark's inspired account of the Transfiguration. Mark had undoubtedly heard Peter's account of the event, who had been one of the three men privileged to witness the Transfiguration in person. Yet Peter later wrote in his 2nd Epistle that the Bible now serves as a **"more sure witness"** for New Testament Christians. While the Transfiguration was undoubtedly an incredible sight, it is the Word of God that today provides God's perfect guidance to his children.

The Confession of Faith -

Nicene Creed – *(Supplement page 5)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 719 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Jesus on the Mountain Peak"

The Sermon – 2 Kings 2:1-12 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"Three Men in the Cloud, but Only One on the Cross"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 325 *(Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)*

"O Thou that Hear'st when Sinners Cry"

The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 179 *(Red Hymnal)*

"On My Heart Imprint Thine Image"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (39) Average (42)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Wednesday	-5:30 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Ash Wednesday Service
Thursday	-7:00 p.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Caleb Schaller is considering the call to Luther Memorial of Fond du Lac, WI. Teacher Neal Bernthal is considering the call to Faith of Markesan, WI and Teacher Andrew Roehl is considering the call to St. John's of Clarkston, WA.

Lenten Service – This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent. Midweek services are scheduled for each Wednesday throughout the season of Lent.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet on Thursday evening of this week. Please bring agenda topics to the attention of President Mark Johnson.

Easter Flowers – Time to place our order for Easter flowers. There is a sign-up sheet on the mailbox table for those interested. See Sandy Roehl if you have questions.