

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Jesus Only”**

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The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Feb. 19, 2012

*“And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only” (Mark 9:7-8).*

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience, something that changed everything . . . the way you see yourself and the way you see God? Maybe it was the birth of your child, and you felt as if you brushed up against the creative powers of God and you were so humbled and awed by it and made profoundly grateful. It changed who you are. Similarly, some of you have brushed up against tragedy, nearly falling from a lethal height at work, or maybe there was a near miss on the highway, but by God’s grace you were spared, and you breathed a sigh of relief and a prayer of gratitude and have been more alive ever since. Some of you have been in the hospital, not far from death, hardly aware of what was really going on. But your friends and family were praying for you, your church was praying for you, as were other churches scattered across the country and across denominations, they were praying for you too because someone knew you, knew your circumstances and talked to the pastor before the service and to this day you are convinced you could *feel* it when people were praying for you. It’s mysterious and you have a hard time describing it, but you know it as sure as you know anything: you could feel it.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? Maybe the next Sunday you came to church wanting to sing a hymn of praise for that experience, but for whatever reason, the hymns and songs that day just weren’t cutting it. You could not get your teeth into them. You came to church wanting to shout a loud “Amen!” somewhere in the service, but it wasn’t that kind of service and it wasn’t the kind of sermon. You came to church wanting to celebrate this experience with others, but once here you looked at them and knew they wouldn’t understand. They wouldn’t get it. They’d write it off as just the excitement of a brand new father or the relief of one who nearly lost his life. Or worse, they’d look at you and wonder if you weren’t missing a few buttons. You came to church wanting to shout it out from the mountaintop. You went home quiet, dejected and disappointed. It often seems to happen that way. Close on the heels of a mountaintop experience comes a major let down.

One day, Peter, James and John had a mountaintop experience. The text says Jesus led them up a high mountain and there he was transfigured before them. Whatever it was that happened to Jesus stretches the limitations of language. Words cannot carry the freight here. The appearance of Jesus changed . . . dramatically. We say transfigured. The Greek says “metamorphothe” from which comes our word “metamorphosis”, like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. Matthew says his face shown like the sun, and his clothes became radiant, Mark says, intensely white, whiter than anyone could bleach them. Moses and Elijah, long dead, also appear, and talk with Jesus. Then Peter starts saying something about building three shelters,

because that's what Peter does when he's wound up: he starts talking without really having a good plan for what he wants to say. And then there's a bright cloud that envelops them all and a voice from within the cloud says, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And then . . . just like that, it's over. Moses and Elijah are gone. The cloud has disappeared. The voice is silent. The text says "they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only."

Jesus only. And you get the sense they're disappointed. They saw Jesus only. His face no longer shining like the sun; his clothes no longer radiant, no longer intensely white. It's just Jesus again. It's Jesus only, and it's a letdown for Peter, James and John. They'd just glimpsed the glory of God but now it's back to the old, familiar Jesus. No more glory. No time to build tents. In fact, Jesus starts leading them down from that mountain.

On the way he charges them not to tell anyone what they had seen, until he has risen from the dead. There's that talk of death again! They hate it when he starts talking of suffering and death. That's not part of the plan, at least not part of their plan. They particularly hate the word cross which he's using lately. He seems to have his mind fixated on suffering and dying on a cross as if it were an irrational fear, a phobia. In fact, when Peter tried to reason with him, tell him that yes, crosses are real but the chances are slim of that happening to you so it's not worth worrying about. That's when Jesus let him have it. "Get behind me Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man."

So, in short order they went from glimpsing the glory of God at the top of the mountain, to talking of crucifixion and death at the bottom. How very disappointing.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? They're nice. But they're unpredictable. You cannot really count on them, can you? You cannot make them happen. It would be great to have our faith given a booster shot now and then by a mountaintop experience but you cannot force them, nor does God promise to give them. In fact, on this topic Jesus has some rather harsh words. "It's a wicked and adulterous generation that looks for signs and wonders." Apparently he doesn't think we should need them.

Another thing about mountaintop experiences, about signs and wonders is that once you've had one, you want another, and another after that. Once you've had one, you expect another, and are miffed and confused when God doesn't provide one when you or someone you loved really needed it. Doesn't God love us anymore? Sure he does. The Word makes that abundantly clear, but remember, you're not basing your faith on the Word anymore. You're basing it on signs and wonders because that's what sinners are inclined to do.

We should not need these things to prop up our faith. He does not want us to base our faith on these fleeting experiences, because then our faith would also be fleeting. He wants us to put our trust in the Rock of his Word which is not fleeting. It is solid, reliable. You can study it. God speaks through it. Mountaintop experiences, they come and go, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. If we are to remain faithful unto death, we're going to need more than just a sensational experience now and then. To get through this life with faith intact, you need the objective, unchangeable Word of God in your hearts and minds and coursing through your blood.

Maybe that's why neither Peter, James nor John chose to give a personal account of the Transfiguration. They would each write parts of our New Testament, but none of them would write about the Transfiguration. Each in his own way points us back to Word and Sacrament. It

seems they don't want us to rest our faith on the experiential or sensational, because it doesn't so much matter how we feel. It matters what God has promised, what God has said.

There may be mountaintop experiences now and then, but they are punctuated with long periods of deep trials, turmoil at work, challenging relationships, stress, disappointment. To get through these trials and temptations we're going to need something more than just a spectacular display of God's power. We're going to need the weakness of God's Son on the cross. We're going to need the Jesus whose clothes are not radiant, but are filthy and bloodied. We're going to need the Jesus one who is not surrounded by Elijah and Moses, but the one numbered among the transgressors, with thieves on either side of him and mockers all around. We're going to need the one who from the cross cries out, "Father, forgive them." We're going to need the one whose blood cleanses us of our sin today in his Supper. We're going to need the one who assures us we are still his children through Holy Baptism, in spite of our sin, because it depends on his goodness rather than our own.

So if you are ever fortunate enough to be given a mountaintop experience, give thanks to God for it, for sure. Praise him for it. But don't rest your faith on them and don't assume it will always work that way for you or anyone else. Treasure those experiences up in your heart, but then it's back into God's Word because that's where he tells us true salvation comes not with a near miss, nor a spectacular display. It comes with "Jesus only". Amen.