



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## A Glory Like No Other

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

February 14, 2010

*Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday (Year C)*

**Luke 9:28-43**

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*Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

*On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.*

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Valentine's Day—Love. If there's a word we've gotten mixed up, it's that one. We've turned love into a sentimental, gushing, thing, rather than a sacrificial offering of ourselves to another.

But today's not just Valentine's Day. It's also Transfiguration Sunday, and another word comes into focus—"glory." And we've mixed that one up a bit too. When it comes to God's glory, there's more than meets the eye. In fact, that's what the church calendar

has been telling us.

We began the church's year in Advent with the promise that all would see the glory of the Lord. You may remember it best from Handel's *Messiah*, when the choir sings: "And the glory, the glory of the Lord, shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it."

At Christmas we beheld the glory of God wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. We have bowed with the shepherds who came to see what the angels kept singing about. We, like Mary, have pondered in our hearts the meaning of it all. Then, on Epiphany Sunday, we knelt beside the wise men who had followed a star and found Jesus.

And, in these Sundays following Epiphany, we have heard again how Jesus was baptized, and we heard the voice from heaven, saying, "This is my Son." We have seen Jesus touch the untouchable; teach with a new authority; overturn expectations, and preach the nearness of God's promised kingdom. In a sense, we've been seeing the glory of the Lord in the person of Jesus Christ, a glory that we could have never expected.

To this point in the church year, we have moved from darkness to light, and we have watched as the light of God's glory has filled the earth. But this week, things will change. On Wednesday we'll move into the season of Lent. We'll move into that time of penitence and preparation for Easter, which leads us unavoidably through the shadows of the Cross. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are always on the way to Jerusalem and the Cross, and this week the church will begin our Lenten journey as we struggle with what it means to be followers of this Crucified One.

Today serves as a hinge between these two liturgical seasons. We look back to our growing understanding of the nature of what it means for Jesus to be the Christ, and we look ahead to a time of costly discipleship as followers of the crucified Christ. This Sunday, then, stands as a hinge moment in the liturgical year as we prepare to move into the season of Lent.

This day, then, works the way the story of the Transfiguration does within the larger structure of Luke's gospel. The primary context for the Transfiguration story in Luke's gospel is suffering. It is bracketed on each side by references to the suffering that the Messiah is to undergo.

In fact, Luke tells us, it was "just eight days ago" that Peter had answered Jesus' question with the stunning confession: "Who are you? You are the Christ of God." It was then that Jesus began to tell them exactly what that meant. To be the Christ meant to be rejected; to be the Christ meant to endure suffering; and, they never would have guessed it, to be the Christ meant to be killed. And then Jesus told the disciples: "You've heard what it means for me to be the Christ. Now here's what it means for you to be my disciples: You will take up your own cross and follow me."

With those words ringing in their ears, Peter, James, and John go with Jesus to the mountain, and once there, he is transfigured before them. Luke tells us that Jesus' face

changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Then Elijah and Moses (representing the Law and the Prophets) appear. These two figures connect this story to Israel's history with God's glory. Moses and Elijah each had had intimate encounters with God's glory on mountains of transfiguration which helped to shape Israel's faith struggle with God. Now this text dramatically proclaims that the Jesus embodies the glory of God that we have been promised all flesh shall see together.

Peter then blurts out a suggestion: "I will build some dwelling places for you and Moses and Elijah." A holy terror has gripped James and John and Peter, and their vocabulary has been reduced, in Peter's case, to irrelevance, and for James and John, fearful silence.

They simply didn't know what to say. Into that awkward silence comes the voice from heaven with familiar words: "This is my Son." This time, there is a summons to discipleship: "Listen to him." The cloud obscures their vision, they only hear the voice, and then, upon looking around, see only Jesus. And so, with nothing else to see or do, they listen. They emerge from the fog on the mountain and within their minds, still trying to make sense of the words Jesus and dead in the same breath, and they walk back down the mountain to step back onto Luke's more familiar path—the path to the Cross. The path to suffering and death. And they will cling to this vision of the glory of God in Jesus Christ for all its worth, for soon this glory will be hard to see in the One dying on the cross.

The transfiguration of Jesus is a glimpse into the future. It is not just a glimpse of any future. It is a vision of the ultimate future, God's promised future, and this glimpse of the future creates for all of God's disciples the most awesome responsibility we can be given.

This highly symbolic story contains within it the truth celebrated at his baptism. Here it is reaffirmed—"This is my Son." The presence of Moses and Elijah only increase the reality that Jesus is filled with the glory of God.

It was an amazing moment. It was as if Peter, James, and John were standing on the edge of a new world where all would see what they were seeing—the glory of the Lord.

It's no wonder that Peter didn't want the moment to end. He's been given a lot of grief for suggesting he build dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus. It was as if all would be well if they stayed. This was a clear connection to the annual Festival of Booths which looked back to the days when God lived with the people in tents and forward to the promised day when God would dwell again with the people.

Some scholars have suggested that it was this understanding that prompted Peter's suggestion. In this experience, he thought the future had come. "Let's build the booths."

But though the future had not come, it had been seen. The transfiguration occurs in the middle of Jesus' ministry. They are still on a journey to the Cross; there are still vil-

lages to go through, diseases to heal, good news to speak, and disputes to be settled. The future had been seen, and now it shaped the present with urgent responsibility.

And that's where the church is today. We are those who have come to see the promises of God's future in Jesus Christ, and so we work now and live the future in the present. We work for justice. We strive for peace. We outdo one another in love. We forgive. There is a tremendous responsibility for us to live into the future we have seen in Jesus Christ.

And that future changes our actions today. In the second part of today's reading, we see Jesus and the disciples ministering back in the suffering world. No longer on the mountain top, they are down in the streets, and it's clear that God's glory is seen there as well.

Michael Jenkins, the author of the book I'm teaching in Sunday School—*Called to Be Human*—reminds the church that we must always engage the society around us. We don't simply hide away. Quoting the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he reminds us that "the church is the church only when it exists for others." Jenkins then builds on Bonhoeffer's writings: "If it is true...that people in contemporary North America are yearning for a 'transcendent experience of the sacred,'...then, Bonhoeffer would assure us, they need look no further than the face of the humanity at their doorstep if they wish to see God. The holy is *always* within our reach, if we will only reach out to our neighbor." (45)

You have opportunity to do that today. If you want to see God's glory—a glory like no other—then I hope that you will consider how you can help when our congregation serves as hosts for the HARTS program in a few weeks. And then, because we believe that we can encounter the holiness of God by reaching out to our neighbors, we're also planning for a wonderful Massanutten Cares day in April, a day when we will go into the community around us because we know that it is filled with the glory of God, and we will bear witness to all the places God's glory is even now shining.