

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Lent is almost upon us. We know it, not just because the media likes to report on the revelry — perhaps debauchery — of Mardi Gras, but because we Lutherans are celebrating the Transfiguration of our Lord.

Lent is a time of sober contemplation on the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, on His suffering that leads to His death on a cross. We Christians reflect this soberness during this season with our bodies, perhaps with fasting in our daily lives, hopefully with increased devotion to our Lord's word. There is no law that says we must exercise this discipline, but we do it knowing that THAT man is called blessed who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night.

There is no law for this in the church, either, but she also has a Lenten discipline. We add times of prayer — our Wednesday vespers. We deny ourselves certain things. For one, we deny ourselves the singing of the *Gloria in Excelsis*. We deny ourselves the saying and singing of Alleluias — the Hebrew word for praise the Lord. “Enclose and seal up the word,” we'll say at the end of this service. We even forego the sight of it as we remove the alleluia banner from among us and focus on a time of tears because of our sin. But it's only for a time, and we do not despair, for Christ won the victory, and we “shall say it with great joy when that day comes” — the day of the resurrection of our Lord.

But even before we get to the fast, we Lutherans especially have a bit of a feast. It's called the Transfiguration of our Lord, and it has been a major festival of the Church for many years. Roman Catholics celebrate the festival on August 6. Lutherans, on the other hand, and certain other Protestant churches, celebrate the Festival of the Transfiguration on the last Sunday before Lent. And it acts as a “pick-me-up” — a bit of encouragement prior to making the hard trudge through Lent. It's like distance runners before a marathon or cyclists before a Grand tour. They feast beforehand. They need the carbs to get them through the race.

In Jesus' transfiguration, He goes up a mountain with Peter, James, and John, His three closest disciples, for they needed a “pick-me-up,” too. Only six days earlier, Jesus had told them what to expect in the days ahead.

In fact, you know the story well. Peter had just confessed on behalf of the disciples that Jesus was “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt. 16:16). What a marvelous confession of Jesus that was, revealed to Peter by the Father in heaven. Jesus would tell Peter and the others, “*on this rock [of your confession] I will build my church*” (Matt. 16:18). And He told them: “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 16:19) that is, He told them, I'm giving you the authority to forgive sins or, if the people do not repent, to withhold forgiveness.

And, to be sure, that all sounds great! But then, Matthew records that “*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders*

*and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*" (Matt. 16:21). And that was too much to bear. "No way, Lord," Peter said. "Not to you!"

Jesus had to scold Peter. "Knock it off, Peter. This is God's way. It has to be this way." And it's not just going to affect me, but you also, for "*If anyone would come after me, [he must] deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (Matt. 16:24). That was tough for the disciples to hear.

But isn't it tough for us all to hear? It was tough for the Corinthians Christians, both Jew and Greek. "*The word of the cross is folly*" says St. Paul (1 Cor. 1:18). Again, "*Christ crucified [is] a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles*" (1 Cor. 1:23).

The cross still offends because it forces us to admit our sinful condition. The cross forces us to admit that our failures put Jesus on the cross, that our sins merited the punishment He endured for us. The cross forces us to admit that the blows, the scourges, the mockery that He endured, the nails and spear, Jesus' last expiring breath were because of us ... we deserved it; He endured it ... for us! The cross forces us to admit that we are helpless before our holy and mighty God. "Lord, have mercy," remains our plaintive cry in Lent.

But before the fast, there is the feast. Peter, James, and John experienced a feast for their eyes and ears on the Holy Mountain. Jesus took them up and was transfigured before them, thus showing them a bit of "*the glory that is [yet] to be revealed to us*" (Rom. 8:18). To be transfigured is to change appearance, and Jesus was. His Divine glory, long hidden behind the veil of His flesh, began to shine through it. His face began to shine, not with reflected light as Moses' face had done when he had been in the Divine presence, but from within for the Divine glory was His. Here was "*the sunrise ... from on high*" (Luke 1:78). Jesus' face shone like the sun, a light too bright with Divine glory for the disciples to continue to look at it, even as we dare not look at the sun with eyes unprotected. So majestic was His glory that it shone through His clothes as white as light.

As this sensory feast continued, guests arrived: Moses and Elijah. Matthew's account is mostly interested in Moses. Not only does his account list Moses first, but his account is also the only one of the three synoptic Gospels that tells us of Jesus' shining face, reminiscent of Moses' glowing face, pointing us to the fact that Jesus is being presented here as the One like unto Moses whom the Lord would raise up.

Peter felt a bit uncomfortable, having been invited to this feast. He wanted to join in the dinner conversation, but could only offer a meek: "Glad to be here. Thanks for inviting us. Can I do something? Put up some tents, maybe." His offer went unheeded. Jesus with Moses and Elijah were holding "converse high" (LSB413:2), and as they did a cloud enveloped them, even as a cloud had covered

the mountain Moses ascended to receive the Law. On that mountain the glory of the Lord appeared before him. Here, the Father made His entrance.

And He spoke from the cloud even as He had done almost 1,500 years before. This time, though, it was not the Law on stone tablets that was given, but the revelation of a promise fulfilled: *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”*

*“Listen to him!”* Those words spoken about Jesus would have been recognized by the disciples, for those words had also been given to Moses to speak: *“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen ...”* (Deut. 18:15). But this time the Father Himself thundered them from the cloud.

Rightly were these three sinners terrified. They were in the presence of the LORD and of His Christ, the Son of God, the Prophet. They were in the presence of Him, whom one cannot see and live (Ex. 33:20). Yet, in His grace, God the Father hid Himself in the cloud. And it is grace that Jesus, His beloved Son, in His incarnation was hidden by flesh, for the disciples were seeing God’s backside. And yet it was still glorious, that they could see and live to tell about it. That bit of grace was what they needed to endure the days ahead.

Dear saints, our vision of the glory of God is veiled even further, yet it is sure, even more sure than what Peter saw on that mountain. We see God’s glory veiled in the words of Holy Scripture, yet this prophetic and apostolic word shines brightly still, like a lamp shining in a dark place. We “see” the glory of God as we come into His presence, yet we come not to gaze at Him with our eyes but hear Him with our ears and receive Him with our mouths. Veiled this time under bread and wine, Jesus comes to us today, having accomplished all that He had set out to do, having accomplished all that He was preparing Peter and James and John to endure, and us, too, in a lesser manner here in Lent.

For on this side of the resurrection, we see things in a different light. We enter Lent knowing what happened on the third day. And so, when we think of Jesus being lifted up unto cross and death, we don’t lament, but rejoice. It was for us sinners. We don’t lament the cross, but are drawn to it, and to Him who was lifted up on it (John 12:32). We rejoice to receive our Jesus veiled in words spoken by men of God being carried along by the Holy Spirit and in water that hides the grace of a new birth in the Holy Spirit and in bread and wine that carries Christ to us and bestows forgiveness, life, and salvation.

This is the feast that prepares us for our Lenten fast. Come, receive this feast of victory for our God, and sing, at least for a couple more days, your alleluias.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.