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Sermon for February 14, 2021

Transfiguration Sunday

Shared with the Virginia Synod, ELCA

Blessings. Blessed morning, I am Robert McCarty, dean of the Southern Valley Conference, and pastor at Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Staunton, Virginia. I have the privilege to share this festival—The Transfiguration—with many congregations across the Virginia Synod.

The Holy Gospel According to St. Mark the 9th Chapter

Here at Christ Staunton, our celebration of the transfiguration draws attention to the stained glass cruciform that shines light into our sanctuary. As far as I know, Christ Staunton has one of the few cruciform crosses—a cross that includes the body of Christ—hanging above an altar in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Grace and Peace to You in The Name of Christ our Savior

In *Feasting on the Gospels*, L. Roger Owens reminds the church that we live in a visual culture and many desire for their faith “to be fueled by sensory stimulation.” His reminder gave me another reason to share the visual of Christ Staunton’s cross with you. I blended two separate recordings to give the changing intensity of

brightness. Owens mentions the visual appeal of our higher attendance Easter and Christmas worship, where festive music, trumpets, and flowers of the season fill our sanctuaries. Many people crave transformative experiences and want the wow moment Jesus shares with Peter, James and John, of light, bodily transfiguration, glorification and the living appearance of two ancient figures speaking timeless wisdom with Jesus. I wonder: could you handle that? The experience filled the three friends of Jesus with awe and even terrified them. For a fleeting instant they see and they hear “WOW” but then their experience, the sensory overload, goes away. What a let down that must have been. What does scripture say? “a cloud overshadowed them.” Owens observes, that most of us who live a life of faith can relate to that cloud; “while we long for visual stimulation, living a life of faith is more like traveling in a cloud.” We do not have a lot of clarity in our lives and we live a life of conflicting images that further confuse us (Owens, L. Roger, “Pastoral Perspective on Mark 9: 2-8” in *Feasting on The Gospels*, p 254-9). Images of peace seem fleeting or even non-existent only to be overshadowed by news of violence, personal experiences of fear related to sickness like the pandemic, followed by an emotional let down we know too well. Yet peace finds a way to break through to give moments that lift us up.

You often see this in your desire for peace and your desire for justice in the world. You catch glimpses of peace or you catch glimpses of justice only to have shrouds or clouds overshadow those glimpses, leaving you let down and longing for more, crying out “don’t stop God, let me see more of your kingdom.”

One of my favorite moments of peace, which seems to work in this fleeting way, is the quiet hush of freshly fallen snow. We have had that fresh fallen snow the last two Sunday mornings in Staunton. You go outside and get surrounded by a bit of the hush as snow just muffles the sounds around us. You breath in the hush and the peace. Even the crunch of the snow under the weight of your feet sounds

delightful and feels silly, or fun, as you sink in. Sometimes the snow can be blinding with the sunlight bouncing off of it. Then you and your neighbors live together in the peaceful moment to get some walkways and driveways shoveled clear. You check in on each other, laugh a little bit, tell a story or two about storms of the past. Maybe you get some sledding in. Of course after time, the peaceful experience I get from winter snow disappears, sometimes quite quickly. Eventually winter, even with snow, just turns cold and becomes work. My feet get wet and get cold and I have to go inside and pop a couple of Advil before my back starts hurting. ~~Many of you know exactly what I am talking about.~~ The cloud arrives and the peacefulness fades. We long for more moments like this, but we have trouble seeing them and trouble holding on to them.

The same holds true with justice. We long for justice for all of humanity. Justice serves as another fleeting reality, which like peace, you catch glimpses of without fully experiencing. God longs for justice in the world and yet it seems fleeting. Last week, the first week of February, I read Representative John Lewis' final essay published in the New York Times on the day of his funeral in July last summer. John Lewis has an incredible legacy as a civil rights leader. He spoke along with Martin Luther King Junior at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. In John Lewis' 1963 speech, he talked about marching, where they would march and how they would march. He said, "we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today." A year and half after that bright beacon moment in Washington, late winter 1965, Lewis led the march from Selma to Montgomery and was beaten when he crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which was a big shadow of a moment. Fifty-five years later, after he announced his cancer diagnosis, Lewis gathered with other members of Congress at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Last year in the month of March they together walked again across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, peacefully walked across the bridge. In between those two

marches fifty five years apart, our lives have included beacons of light that have brought voice and votes to oppressed people interspersed with the shadows of oppression that have snuffed out life and denied freedom. The people of Georgia elected Lewis to represent them in the United States House of Representatives. He served in congress from 1987 to his death last summer.

John Lewis witnessed, not just witnessed but lived out, both the highs and the lows of the march for equality for African Americans. In his final essay he described Emmett Till as his George Floyd and also referenced the shrouds of Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina as well as the deadly concert in Las Vegas. His final paragraph though shared his bright light of hope for the future. John Lewis ended his essay by sharing his hope for justice and peace as a lasting light shining upon us. He ended his essay with these words, “In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.” (Lewis, John, “Together, You Can Redeem The Soul Of Our Nation” in *The New York Times* on July 17, 2020.)

John Lewis made sure to mark his death the bright light of hope.

The voice of God in this gospel lesson reminds you of the importance of listening. We have two ears and one mouth, the saying goes so we should listen at least twice as much as we talk. We seek out words of wisdom, words of love and we latch on to them with ears and with heart for all of the hope we can muster out of them. And most of all we listen to the words of Jesus. You hear that first and

foremost from the cloud that descends around Peter, James and John. “This is my Son the Beloved, listen to him.” Listen to Jesus. What does Jesus tell Peter, James, John and us? Wait for the cross.

As much as one might love Transfiguration Sunday, with the brightness of Christ shining and Christ standing alongside of Moses and Elijah, we cannot allow the glory of this moment to outshine the truth of the cross. Remember, that without the cross, transfiguration becomes an agent of glory that shines around God rather than a light of hope and truth that God shines upon his creation and upon you. Again, one of the reasons that I love the transfiguration festival here, is how the cross of Christ, the cross with Christ, the cross lights up before our eyes. Undoubtedly, waiting for the cross gives Jesus his main reason to ask Peter, James and John to wait and hold back this story until “after the Son of Man rises from the dead.” The transfiguration works to glorify God, but it serves the more important role of bringing hope and truth into your life and to make the cross the true sign of our future together.

You may live a life seeking clarity, confused by conflicting images of turmoil and peace, shadows and light, oppression and justice. You may live life where you hop and you step and you trudge from one moment of peace, to a separate moment of justice to a distant next moment of justice and peace. You hop and you step and you trudge listening for the words of Jesus full of truth, life (light), and healing pointing to his life poured out on the cross for the sake of the whole world. Listening to Jesus and Moses and Elijah, Jesus with law and prophets, listening takes our distant and isolated moments of peace and justice and links them together. Jesus, his cross, and his teachings, links these moments as visions of light cutting through the shrouds and washing out the darkness in between with the brightness of his hope. The light of Christ brings us back to these bright moments as the hopeful sign of his kingdom of peace, his kingdom full of justice and truth

breaking into the world. With the words of Jesus the light of these peace moments and justice moments bleeds together, overlaps and overwhelms the shadows and we believe, yes Lord Jesus your kingdom comes. We have faith, yes lord your kingdom is heavenly, send us the kingdom of God. Listening to the words of scripture fills the shadows of our fears with a heavenly light of hope. Transfiguration, Cross and Listening to Jesus fills our lives with hope-filled moments, the bright moments of justice and peace which show the light of the kingdom of God breaking into our world. God bless the light and the cross of Christ Jesus. Amen