

Listening to the Victor

Transfiguration Sunday; Series A

Matthew 17:1-9

I had a professor at the Seminary who once told the class about his favorite platoon sergeant he had while in the Army. This particular sergeant predicted to his platoon back in the 80's that the United States would win the Cold War over the Soviet Union. During one particular drill during the time of the Cold War this sergeant told his platoon, "Gentlemen, we are going to win this Cold War. You know how I know? Remember Neil Armstrong walking on the moon." The thinking of this particular sergeant was that the United States getting to the moon before the Soviet Union in the space race foreshadowed the ultimate victory over the Soviets in the Cold War. The partial victory in the space race foreshadowed the greater victory to come.

Some of you probably remember seeing the images of Armstrong walking on the moon on your television sets and in newspapers. I am assuming of course that this surreal moment actually happened and was not staged in a Hollywood studio as some might theorize. The surreal-ness of the whole thing might be why some don't really believe the event actually happened. The idea of a human being landing on the moon at that time just seemed completely bizarre and almost dreamlike. Furthermore, it was probably difficult at the time to know the significance of the United States landing on the moon and winning the space race over the Soviet Union.

I imagine that Peter, James, and John, the disciples of Jesus who witnessed his Transfiguration, probably felt like the event was completely surreal, bizarre, and almost dreamlike. Listen again to what they witnessed as we heard it in the Gospel lesson this morning: "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. . . He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him. . .' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only" (Mt 17: 2-3, 5, 8). What a strange and unusual event indeed! We can imagine them asking the same question that Martin Luther has us ask as students of the *Small Catechism*—"What does this mean?"

Peter, James, and John likely had no idea of the full meaning and significance of the event as it was happening. Yet, after Jesus' resurrection from the dead they could look back at the Event of the Transfiguration and understand it more fully. Just as it could be said that Neil Armstrong landing on the moon and the United States winning the space race over the Soviet Union foreshadowed the greater victory over the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, so also Jesus revealing his full glory as "Immanuel," God himself in the flesh on the Mount of Transfiguration foreshadowed the ultimate victory of God for us through his Resurrection from the dead. The story does not end with Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus' sacrifice to purchase forgiveness for the sins of the world was only a part of God's plan to reveal his full glory. Our God is the God of life, after all. He brought life into existence. He sustains your life. In the resurrection of Jesus he makes it possible for you and me to have recreated lives in Christ. He defeats death by rising from it. He makes eternal life possible. In the Transfiguration we see the beauty, the splendor, the magnificence, the glory of this God of resurrection life in the flesh. This surreal event foreshadowed the greater, most glorious event of Jesus' Resurrection.

So how were Peter, James, and John supposed to carry on after witnessing the incredible event of Jesus' Transfiguration? The short answer is, in the same way you and I are called to live as Jesus' disciples today—by listening to the victor. By listening to Jesus. On the Mount of Transfiguration the voice of the Heavenly Father called down from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Mt 17:5). The Heavenly Father, the God of all creation intervenes in his creation to point us to this Jesus of Nazareth. He points us to this one who is greater than the Law and the Prophets who were listened to in the past. He is the one to whom the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elijah, point us. He is the victor. He carries us to victory over our greatest enemies natural and supernatural—Sin, death, Hell, and the Devil. There on the Mount of Transfiguration this Jesus stands alone.

Today we are at the end of the season of Epiphany that begin with an incredible event. The Season of Epiphany in the Church always begins with the remembrance of the Baptism of Jesus. At that event our Triune God revealed himself. The Holy Spirit came down like a dove and rested upon Jesus (Mt 3:16). The voice of the Heavenly Father clamored from the clouds, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). Now at the end of the season of Epiphany that is focused on revealing God's glory and plan of salvation for the whole world, we hear the voice of the Father once more at Jesus' Transfiguration. This time we are called to listen to Jesus. As we enter the season of Lent together as the Church this coming Ash Wednesday we enter a special time of listening to the victor and following him as he leads us once again through the path of victory.

We travel into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We journey into the upper room for the last supper on Maundy Thursday and listen to the Words of Jesus as he institutes the Lord's Supper. We follow Jesus to the cross on Good Friday and listen again to the words he spoke—"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34); "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43); "Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother" (John 19:26–27); "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46); "I thirst" (John 19:28); "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46); "It is finished" (John 19:30). We follow the women to the empty tomb three days later and hear the voice of the angel saying to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. . . There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mk 16:6-7). And we sit in the upper room with the eleven disciples once more, this time in darkness and behind locked doors, and we listen to Jesus the victor as he delivers the spoils of victory, "Peace be with you. . . Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe" (Jn 20:27).

God, our Heavenly Father would have us as his children carry out our pilgrimage in this world listening to Jesus. He would have us do this so that we believe and trust in him and his promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation in his name. He would have us trusting in the victor and his victory not only so that we are kept safely in Christ throughout our days but also so that we can carry out a ministry of listening to others.

As faithful listeners of the Word of God and participants of his grace we are filled with his Spirit and better able to listen to the joys, triumphs, hurts, pains, and trials of others. Having been crucified with Christ only to be risen to new life in the event of our baptisms (Rom 6:4-6); Having buried our alleluias only to have them resurrected with our Lord on Easter Sunday; Having experienced the struggles of our own sin as Jesus' disciples even while hanging on to the hope-filled words of the victor and his resurrection victory, we are better able to listen to others and hear among their stories a longing for true meaning, true, security, true joy, true comfort, and a true identity. We are better able to relate the

story of the victor and his victory for them. We are better able to invite them to hear it every Sunday. We are better able to bring them into participation in God's salvation story through the waters of Holy Baptism, through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, through the singing of hymns, and through the praying of prayers. Listening to Jesus, the victor, we are assured that in spite of all that happens in the middle days of our lives, the victory is ours! Amen.