

One of the beautiful things about the Bible is that, as God the Holy Spirit was writing it through the pens of the prophets and evangelists and apostles, He put in themes that repeat throughout its pages. He does this so that we can see this repetition and learn.

Through the Spirit showing us something again and again in the pages of Scripture, we can better understand Scripture, which both strengthens our love and trust in God and also helps us to rightly apply what we read in those pages. This is of course true for the account of our Lord's transfiguration which we heard this morning.

The theme repeated in the Bible that I would propose to you we see in our Gospel reading is that of movement from a mountain, through a valley, and then up onto a greater mountain. Mountain, valley, mountain. I'll give some examples from Scripture, but first, let me describe this theme in a little more detail.

On the first mountaintop, things are good. God gives a glimpse of His glory, or a taste of His goodness. Yet this mountain, as good as it may be, isn't where man is intended to remain. According to God's will and wisdom, man must move on.

And so, he heads down into a valley. This is a place of testing, of trial, of suffering. But as man is brought through this valley, the Lord uses all these seemingly negative things to bless man and prepare him for his intended destination.

Finally, man is led out of the valley and up onto a second mountain. This one is much, much greater than the first, and here God gives blessings that last forever. This second, greater mountain is where God desires for man to be.

This movement from mountain to valley to mountain could be used to describe all of human history. We start on a mountain, as the Garden of Eden is described. There, things are wonderful, man is perfectly provided for as he dwells in God's presence. Yet the Garden isn't designed to be the end, the goal. Man starts there, but he is to fill the earth and subdue it, to exercise dominion over it on the Lord's behalf.

Sadly, their exit from the Garden takes place under circumstances much worse than the plan the Lord had given to them, as they rebelled against God and forced Him to drive them away from the mountain. Thus, humanity enters the valley of sinful existence. People spread over all the earth: hills, valleys, plains. But spiritually, they are in a valley, a place much lower than the joy and peace of Eden.

The ground bears thorns and thistles. New life comes in only through pain. And in the end, every man and woman will return to the dust from which we came. Our whole life is lived with death always looming; no wonder David describes it as the valley of the shadow of death in the Twenty-Third Psalm.

Yet this valley is something we are brought through; it is not our final destination. Our Good Shepherd is leading us to another mountain: Zion, the mountain of God. The prophets speak of this mountain as the final home of God's people. All nations are gathered there to dwell with the Lord.

They will be fed, not with mere fruit trees like Eden, but with a great and rich feast prepared by God Himself. On that mountain, God will shelter His people, taking away all their sorrow, pain, and misery forever.

God will even swallow up death, so that those with Him on Zion will live in peace and joy forever. That Mount Zion, the picture of the new creation, that is the final destination, the second mountain to which God desires to bring all those traveling through the valley of this life.

To bring us to that mountain, our God and Father sends His only-begotten Son to journey from mountain through valley to mountain. His whole earthly ministry might be described in this way – descending from on high, traveling through this valley of earthly life, and then ascending back on high, having won for Himself a people for His own possession.

But let's zoom in a little bit on a portion of that earthly ministry of Christ. We begin on a mountain, the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus takes three of His closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, with Him. Up on the mountain, we read, "And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light."

Though Jesus was and is fully God and fully man, here on the mountain He reveals some of His divine glory that He had previously kept hidden. His heavenly majesty and splendor shine forth, the radiance of heaven displayed on that mountain.

And the veil between heaven and earth is opened, allowing the departed saints Moses and Elijah to appear and speak with the Lord. Then a bright cloud overshadows everyone, a cloud like that which appeared on Mount Sinai, and the voice of the Majestic Glory speaks, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"

The Father speaking, the Son shining with heavenly splendor, the saints of old appearing – heaven has come to earth! No wonder the three disciples act as they do. As Peter says, it is good to be there!

No doubt part of why Peter says this is that, just six days before, Jesus had said, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." Surely, that mountaintop is the kingdom, Peter would think.

The thing is, though, it can't be. Not the fullness of the kingdom, anyway. It can't be, because fear is still there. The terror that filled the Israelites at Mount Sinai when God came down is the terror felt by Peter, James, and John. That fear shows that the main problem is still there: sin. Sin has separated man from God ever since Adam and Eve, in fear, tried to hide from God in the Garden. If Jesus were to do what Peter suggested and remain on that first mountain, then the sin, the fear, the separation would never be removed.

And so, Jesus must descend the mountain. He must go down into the valley. He must go to the place of trial and suffering, culminating finally in His great passion. The Lord of all descends, from heaven, from the mountain, into the valley of the shadow of death.

He will endure temptation as the tempter tries to lure Him away from the path to the cross. He will suffer abandonment and betrayal as His closest followers and friends run away after one sells Him

out to His enemies. He will endure incredible physical agony as the Romans put all their experience in torturous deaths to use upon Him. And especially, the Son, the beloved, will be forsaken by His Father as all the torments of hell – the eternal wages of sin – are poured out upon Him.

But the Father has not sent His Son to endure this for no reason. The Son enters the valley for a purpose. Through His agony, Jesus pays the price for the sins of the world. As the prophet Isaiah had foretold, “upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.”

Though it was miserable, and undoubtedly seemed to last forever, the valley, the cross, was not Christ’s end, His destination. No, after a rest in the tomb, His Father exalts Him, bringing Him up to a second mountaintop, metaphorically speaking. Jesus is raised up from the valley of the shadow of death, brought up from the grave.

The Lord had told His disciples many times that this would happen, including in our Gospel text. Coming down the mountain, Jesus commands His disciples, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” They were headed down the first mountain, down into the valley of Christ’s passion, but even as they descend the Lord lets them know that He would be headed back up once more.

And once the Son of Man was raised, He would never be brought down again. Death has no power over Him. Jesus was exalted, brought up from the grave, and forty days after that, He ascends to the right hand of the Father. There He rules in glory and power far greater than what was seen at His transfiguration. There He lives and reigns to all eternity.

Because of Jesus, and His descent from the mountain, His travel through the valley, and His ascent again to on high, we too may be brought along that path. There are many mountains, high points, from where we begin certain portions of our journey. These are again places where our Lord reveals portions of His glory and goodness to us.

The greatest of these is Holy Baptism. There, we are joined to Jesus Christ Himself, given His life, clothed in His righteousness, His Spirit shining forth His light into our hearts. We aren’t physically transfigured as Christ was on the mountaintop, but we still have physical items that remind us of these divine gifts, such as the white baptismal garments and the baptismal candle.

And usually, we get to celebrate as a congregation when a new saint is brought into the Kingdom. It’s a wonderful, joyful moment. As Peter said, “It is good that we are here.”

Another mountaintop that we may experience in this life is marriage. There, God joins a husband and wife together as one, giving them and everyone who witnesses the marriage a reminder of His great love for His bride the Church, as we heard last week from Ephesians. A wedding day is another day where we joyfully say, “It is good that we are here.”

Or yet another mountaintop: the birth of a child. There, the Lord reveals His love and goodness as He brings forth a new life into the world. Every child reminds us of His faithfulness and His love, especially in His own birth as a baby. And every child, even though sinful from conception, nevertheless still reminds us of the purity and innocence for which God made us and to which He desires to return us.

The birth of a child brings joy not only to the parents but to grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors, congregation members. All who behold a newborn baby and the love of God shown there can't help but think, "It is good that we are here."

As good as all these things are, and as much as we'd love to remain on those mountaintops forever, we must go down into the valleys below. That new child is beautiful, but many trials will come in raising him to adulthood. These can be everything from late night diaper changes and feedings, to having to discipline bad behavior, to worry and stress as he begins to stretch his wings, and so many other things.

And in all this, there's the struggle of striving both to teach the faith and be an example of the faith as a parent, grandparent, godparent, or other person in the child's life.

The valleys come in marriage as well. God has joined two lives together and blessed them, but the husband and wife are still sinners, and they will inevitably sin against one another. The wife will not submit to the husband, the husband will not love his wife as Christ loved the Church. The valley in which married life takes place will be full of struggles, frustrations, and pain, as sin rears its ugly head.

Sin even attacks the mountain of Baptism and all the gifts given there. To be sure, once a person is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, they are and remain baptized. God's Word only speaks of Baptism, never re-baptism.

Yet the life one lives as a baptized child of God is not lived on the mountaintops of glory, but in the sinful world, the valley of tears, as Luther describes it in the Catechism. All manner of temptations await, with the devil trying mightily to get the Christian to leave the path in the valley and go to one of his appealing hills.

He offers comfort, success, peace, happiness. Now, he can't actually give those things in the true sense. His offers are cheap imitations and lies, like trying to recreate the Transfiguration with smoke machines and floodlights.

Cheap as they may be, though, they can look very appealing to a Christian struggling in the valley of life. And when a faithful child of God refuses such offers, the devil and the world double down on harassment and tribulation.

But in the midst of this valley, the Lord doesn't forsake His own. The Good Shepherd has walked the path we are on. He has been through the valley of the shadow of death, and knowing what it holds, He guides His little flock on the safe path through it.

He comforts His Church with His Word, the light that shines in the darkness of the valley. He comes to us in His Supper, being visibly present with us just as He was for the Israelites in the cloud and the fire during their walk through the wilderness.

He turns all things to good, even in our valleys, using struggle to exercise and strengthen our faith. As His Word tells us, "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame."

When the devil and the world attack us for not going along with them on their paths, Jesus lets us see this as evidence that we are His. He tells us that in our persecutions, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

And when we are at last through the valley of this life, our Lord brings us to Mount Zion itself. There, our God shines in glory, and rather than being frightened like at Mount Sinai or the Mount of Transfiguration, we will rejoice in the glory of God.

There, we won't dwell in temporary tents, as Peter suggested, but as David said, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. That house has a room for you, which Christ has gone ahead to prepare for you.

On Mount Zion, our bodies will be perfect and glorious, like Christ's own body. Such will be the joy and peace of that place that all the struggles we endured on our way there will be completely forgotten.

And again, there we will dwell with our Lord forever. Whereas every earthly high is always joined by the knowledge that you have to come down eventually, the new creation is an elevation into joy that never ends. United with Christ and all the saints, we will never again be separated.

As you travel through this life, let our Lord encourage you by His Word. Let Him remind you that He has walked the path you walk. Look back at the mountains you've descended from and give thanks for the goodness of God given there. Hear His promises that He will sustain you in the valley of this life.

And then lift up your eyes toward the heavenly Mount Zion, and know that, as He has brought Moses and Elijah and all the faithful into His glorious presence, your God will not fail to bring you to that eternal mountain as well.

In Jesus' name, amen.