

Life on this earth is anything but constant. Changes take place all the time. Highs are followed by lows, up and down as the days and years go by. In the transfiguration of Jesus, we see that the glory of God also seems to rise and fall.

Yet as we look closer at this account, and how it fits in with the rest of the Bible, we'll notice that our perception of what is high and what is low, what is glorious and what is plain, what is temporary and what is eternal, isn't necessarily in line with how God has made these things. When we understand them according to the truth of how God and His word, we see what's truly important and through that are blessed.

So the main event described in our Gospel reading is again the transfiguration of Jesus. "Transfiguration" is a word that means a change in appearance or a transformation. On the mountain, Jesus's glory is made visible.

And this is a theme that we've encountered several times throughout the season of Epiphany. We've heard about the glory of the star that led the wise men to the child Jesus. There was the glory of heaven opening and the Holy Spirit descending as a dove when Jesus was baptized. And last week: the glory shown in the power of Jesus's word, which is able to command wind and waves. These are all times where God's glory is shown forth in Jesus, revealing Him to be God in the flesh.

Today, then, the last Sunday in Epiphany, we hear about the greatest display of visible glory in Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up onto a high mountain. There, we read, "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light." Jesus, the Son of God, shines like the sun in the sky, His face even harder to look upon than Moses's after speaking with the Lord. And speaking of Moses, he and Elijah appear, talking with Jesus. Here we have two great heroes of the Old Testament, both of whom went up on a mountain to speak with God, now again on a mountain speaking with God.

And it's not just Moses and Elijah who speak, either. A bright cloud envelopes the mountaintop and God the Father Himself speaks, something that happens very rarely in the Scriptures, and He declares, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am will pleased; listen to Him."

The whole event is like when God appeared to His people on the top of Mt. Sinai – light and cloud and the voice of God – but Peter, James, and John are up on the mountain, in the midst of all that. The visible glory seen in the transfiguration is greater than anything seen in the ministry of Jesus, glory that will only be exceeded when He comes again at the Last Day.

As amazing as that event was, though, it didn't last. Jesus didn't continue to shine like the sun for the rest of his earthly ministry. Moses and Elijah didn't come down the mountain and join the disciples. The cloud vanished, and the voice said nothing more. The high point had come, and then it went. Why?

A couple of reasons are shown. The first is that, apart from the working of the Holy Spirit, man cannot understand or grasp the things of God. When Jesus begins shining with glory and Moses and Elijah appear, Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” Peter sees the glory and wants to hold on to it, make it last.

The thing is, though, this display of glory is not why Jesus has come. Roughly a week before they’re on the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed, and on the third day be raised from the dead. He didn’t come for earthly glory, but to take away the sin of the world at the cross. He also told His disciples at that time, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Following Jesus isn’t a path to worldly glory or comfort or pleasure. It’s a path that involves carrying a cross. Those words were spoken clearly by Jesus to His disciples, but the moment Peter beholds the face of Jesus shining like the sun, his thoughts immediately go to preserving that glory – rather than the work which Jesus has said is necessary.

In addition to man not being able to comprehend the true glory of God, we also see in this account that the full glory of God is in fact terrifying to sinful man. While Jesus is conversing with Moses and Elijah, the disciples are awestruck. But once God the Father speaks to them out of the cloud, they’re on their faces, completely overcome with fear.

This is a reflection of when God appeared to Israel on Mt. Sinai after leading them out of Egypt. Once God has finished speaking the Ten Commandments out of the cloud of glory, the people tremble and say to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

The holiness of God, heard through His voice, is too much for sinful man. The people of Israel, and the disciples, realize that they cannot stand before this God, that by rights they should be destroyed by His perfection and justice and power. Unless there is something or someone to come between God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness, the glory of God brings great fear.

But God doesn’t delight in driving man into terror, or having him lost in wrong ideas about glory, which is why He comes to man in ways that are humble but that last. When Peter, James, and John are laying on the ground shaking with fear, the Lord brings the visible glory to a close. We read, “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

The light, the cloud, the figures – all gone. There is only Jesus. In Jesus, there are the Law and the Prophets – Moses and Elijah. To have Jesus is to have the Father’s voice and the glory of the Holy Spirit. But these are now found in a man looking again like the humble rabbi from Nazareth, a man whose words they can listen to without fear.

Having concealed His glory, Jesus gently reaches down and gasps them, picking up His fearful disciples and dispelling their fear by His words: “Rise, and have no fear.” By His humility, Jesus enables these sinful men to stand in the presence of God Himself.

The humility of Jesus will further be seen in the path He will continue to walk. Shortly after leading His disciples down this mountain, He'll bring them up another one. They will go up to Jerusalem.

There, the disciples will see their Lord, not shining with glory, but insulted and beaten. They will again be given over to fear, but this time fear of man, fear of the mob of Judas. They will perhaps watch, mostly from far off, as Jesus is elevated, not between Old Testament heroes, but between criminals.

The path from the Mount of Transfiguration will lead to the hill of Golgotha, where Jesus will cry out to the Father who had spoken of Him as His beloved Son, but who now has had to forsake His Son because of all the sin He bears – the sin of the world. As the earth goes dark for three hours, it would seem to anyone watching that this was the furthest thing from the glory seen at the Transfiguration.

And yet there on the cross, the true glory of God is revealed. There, the Lord will reveal that His delight is not in displays of power, but in making atonement for those trapped in sin. His glory is seen in His willingness to be not only God, but also sacrifice. Jesus came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as the ransom for many.

And after making that sacrifice and being laid in the tomb, Jesus was raised to life again, glorified by His Father. He appeared to His disciples, not to dazzle them with a shining display, but to show them the physical proof of His victory over death, to let them touch and see His body, sacrificed and raised for them and for all.

Shortly before ascending back into the glory of heaven, Jesus gathered His disciples together and gave them two gifts containing His power, two ways through which their glorious task of making disciples would be carried about. And like Jesus Himself, these two means appear very humble. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Through baptizing and through teaching, the Lord would work through the disciples to bring others into the invisible glory of the Kingdom of God. Through these means of grace, Jesus and His true glory will be with His people, even to the end of the age – forever. That's why Peter writes in our Epistle lesson and says that, even though it was incredible to be on the mountain and hear the voice of the Majestic Glory, greater than that is the word, the lamp shining in our hearts until the eternal day dawns.

That word, and our Lord's working through it, are the glory that we are given still today. We are often tempted to look toward earthly glory to find Jesus. This probably doesn't mean that we're looking for mountains that are glowing or voices that leave everyone trembling in fear for miles around.

No, for us, it often looks like searching for earthly prosperity or success to know if we're being "blessed." When things are going well, when life is good, we're tempted to think, "I must be doing

what I'm supposed to. Jesus must be happy with me. I should keep doing what makes me feel this way." And on the other side, when things are rough, when suffering or sadness come into our lives, we're tempted to think that whatever caused the suffering must be a bad thing that we should avoid.

But this chasing after worldly glory or happiness won't point us to Jesus. Now, often, the Lord does give us times of happiness and occasions for great joy: the birth of a child, a Baptism, time spent with friends and family. These are blessings, to be sure!

But in this life, those feelings of happiness simply don't last forever. The birth of a child is wonderful – but when you're running on minimal sleep for days and weeks the joy isn't felt quite as much. A Baptism is a time of great joy – but then you go out into the world and the attacks of the devil and the temptations of the world come at you as the prince of darkness rages against this new bearer of God's light.

Our own sinful flesh, drowned in Baptism, tries to rise up and attack the new man born of the Spirit, leading to conflict within us and with others around us. That sinful nature also leads us to find pleasure in the things that go against God and His word. "If it feels good, do it." "If everyone's doing it, it can't be wrong." "God wouldn't want you to be the weird one, to be left out, so go along with the crowd."

The search for earthly glory and comfort and happiness, the desire to keep the good feelings going, doesn't direct us to Jesus. As our Lord tells us, "the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many."

Therefore, we must not seek after the glory of this world. When good times come, we give thanks to God for them. But much more importantly, we look to the humble ways that Jesus comes to us, for those are the ways that lead to lasting glory.

Today we saw our Lord use humble water to bring two souls into His Kingdom. Did it appear glorious to our human senses or reason? No! But hidden from our eyes, God has put His word, His name, His power, in that water. The promise of God, grasped by faith, gives Baptism eternal significance. When the devil would attack with doubt or guilt or despair, a Christian can say with confidence, "I am baptized. I am a child of God. The Father in heaven is my Father, and He loves me perfectly."

The world and the devil can rage against Baptism, but they can't undo it. The only person who can render Baptism ineffective is the person who is baptized.

That's why the second means Jesus speaks of in Matthew is so important. Disciples are made by baptizing and teaching. Baptism brings forth the new life; teaching sustains and strengthens that life. The word of God doesn't look like much. To an unbeliever, it doesn't sound like much. And yet it contains the power of God unto salvation. In it, God reveals what is best for all people, both for this life and for the life to come.

Kyler, the book you received today is a lamp that will show you the path to heaven. Time you spend reading it is always time well spent. And parents, teach your children the word of God, for it is the most valuable thing you can pass on to them. There are a lot of things you do as loving parents to

care for your children in this life. Helping them grow in the knowledge and love of their Savior will bless them for eternity.

And this is true for all Christians. Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of God will never pass away, nor will those who trust in it.

Throughout our lives, we are constantly tempted to chase after the glory of this world. But that glory is passing away – here today, gone tomorrow.

In the word, however, the word made flesh and the word inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are given what is truly and eternally glorious. In this life, it may not look like much, but in the life to come, it will be greater than any glory this world had to offer. Seek that glory – the glory of Christ – above all else, for it will last forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.