

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: The Climax of Epiphany: Transfiguration

Lesson: Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure,^[a] which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) ³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

I had a rather fascinating experience. After completing my ordination interview in February, I was on my way home from Pine Lake in Westfield. On the way, I stopped by Kwik Trip for a brief moment and ate two donuts. However, by around 2 p.m., which was slightly past lunchtime, I started feeling hungry again. So, I decided to stop by Panda Express in Eau Claire while also doing some grocery shopping.

(Slide 1) I enjoy eating at Panda Express and go there from time to time. If you have ever eaten at Panda Express, you know that they always give you a fortune cookie with your meal. Normally, I have no interest in opening it, so I usually don't even bother. I don't know why, but that day, I felt like I had to open that cookie.

Inside, there was a message. It read: "A long-awaited vacation will bring a great deal of pleasure – Panda Express." How did they know I was about to go on vacation? It was so intriguing that I immediately took a picture and sent it to my wife.

My last vacation was in June of last year when my sister-in-law visited, and this upcoming vacation was my first in a long time. I was really hoping for a relaxing and restful break, so seeing this message from Panda Express was both amusing and delightful.

Then, after the third Sunday of February worship service, we were packing for our trip to Southern California, where my wife's relatives live. You know that feeling? No matter how thoroughly you pack all day and double-check to make sure nothing is missing, as soon as you leave the house, you realize you've forgotten something? We often leave something behind when we travel. But strangely, this time, even though we didn't pack with extra effort, we didn't forget anything.

On the day we headed to the airport, no matter how early we got up and prepared, there were always unexpected circumstances that could cause us to miss our flight or lead to delays. However, this time, everything went smoothly, and we boarded the plane successfully without any issues.

Of course, before boarding, we stopped at Subway to grab a sandwich, but there were so many people that by the time we got our order, our boarding time was very close—though that was the case. Still, we made it onto the plane without any problems and arrived in L.A. safely.

When people think of Southern California, they often imagine dry and hot weather. However, December and February are part of the rainy season, so it often rains, and the weather tends to be windy and cloudy. We had visited L.A. many times in January or February, and almost without exception, it was always cloudy, windy, and rainy while we were there.

My wife's aunt even used to joke that whenever we came to L.A., the weather would turn gloomy, calling us "the bringers of rain and wind."

But this time, strangely, the weather was beautiful. Until the week before we arrived, there had been heavy rain, almost like a flood, but as soon as we got there, the sun was shining brightly, and the temperature was between 70 and 80 degrees. We were also worried about air quality due to the recent severe wildfires in California, but because it had rained heavily before we arrived, the air was surprisingly clear.

This was a rare occasion—we didn't miss our flight, we didn't lose important items like our stroller, and the weather was perfect. It was almost like a golden vacation, a true blessing from God.

Don't misunderstand—I am not saying I blindly believed the message from the Panda Express fortune cookie like a superstition. But just as the message had said, we were able to fully enjoy our long-awaited vacation in great weather, resting well and returning safely to Wisconsin.

(Slide 2) Anyhow, today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, and at the same time, it is Transfiguration Sunday. To me, this season of Epiphany has felt particularly meaningful.

We often place great importance on Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter because they are tied to holidays, while sometimes overlooking the importance of Epiphany. However, this year, I had the opportunity to deeply meditate on the messages of Epiphany—why Jesus came to this world, how He came, and who He is.

During this season of Epiphany, Jesus continuously revealed who He is to His disciples and to us. And finally, He was transfigured before His disciples, fully revealing His divine nature. In this sense, Transfiguration Sunday can be seen as the climax of Epiphany.

Jesus took His disciples Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray. While we don't know the exact time of day, Jesus would often spend His days healing people, teaching, and training His disciples, and then in the late evening or early morning, when everyone else was asleep, He would spend deep, intimate time in prayer with God.

Considering Jesus' daily pattern, it is likely that He took His disciples up the mountain late at night or early in the morning to pray.

As Jesus prayed deeply, His appearance changed. His face shone with light, illuminating the surrounding darkness, and two figures from the Old Testament—Moses and Elijah—appeared and spoke with Him about His coming departure in Jerusalem.

Although the three disciples were exhausted and had fallen asleep, they woke up, possibly due to the radiance of Jesus and the voices of Moses and Elijah. What they saw was astonishing.

For them, witnessing Moses and Elijah, two of the most significant figures in Jewish history, standing alongside Jesus was a breathtaking moment.

At that moment, Peter may have believed that following Jesus was the best decision of his life. Since the day he met Jesus, Peter had witnessed one amazing event after another:

He had tried all night to catch fish but failed—until Jesus told him to cast his nets, and suddenly, he caught an abundance of fish. He had seen countless people healed

by Jesus. He had watched Jesus feed over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish in a remote place.

Peter had no regrets about following Jesus. Perhaps, he even dreamed of a successful life alongside Jesus.

That's why, without hesitation, Peter suggested building three shelters on the mountain—for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—so they could remain in that glorious moment.

(Slide 3) But Scripture says: “He did not know what he was saying.”

Here, the contrast between Jesus' perspective and Peter's perspective becomes clear. Jesus' definition of salvation, victory, and success was very different from Peter's. Peter likely imagined Jesus becoming the political king of Jerusalem and Israel, and perhaps, what mattered most to him was that Jesus would remember him, keep him as a close confidant, and share power with him.

But Jesus was not a Messiah who sought political power, military strength, or magical control. He was the Son of God, full of love, peace, and humility.

Of course, as God's Son, He could have ruled all things by force, but instead, He chose the path of sacrificial love—not granting temporary worldly success, but solving the problem of salvation that we could never solve on our own. And this salvation could only be achieved through His suffering, death, and resurrection.

(Slide 4) Friends, this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the 40-day season of Lent. During this time, our churches will take turns hosting Lenten Wednesday gatherings, and I encourage you to participate if possible. More importantly, I hope this Lenten season will be more than just an ordinary Lent for us.

I ask you to deeply meditate on the love and sacrifice of Jesus, who carried the heavy cross on our behalf. Let's take this time to examine our spiritual relationship with God—where we stand, how we are doing, and whether we are truly aligned with Him.

May this be a season where our relationship with God deepens, where we take one step further toward maturity in faith. May we truly experience why Jesus came to this world, why He suffered, why He carried the cross, and why He was forsaken on that cross for us. This is my hope and prayer for each of us. Amen.