**The Transfiguration of Our Lord**

**February 27, 2022**

**Text—Luke 9:28-36**

It’s rare that I preach a sermon in which I draw material from all three of the assigned readings for the day. There is sometimes some overlap in theme between two of them, but rarely do we see the same themes present in all three. Today, however, is an exception to that trend. Today, all three of our assigned readings have one thing in common, one thread that binds all of them together. So in this morning’s sermon, I am going to be addressing that one thread, and that thread is the person of the prophet Moses.

Most of us here have probably heard a fair amount about Moses. We know that he was the baby born to an Israelite slave family in Egypt, whose mother put him in a basket in the river to keep him away from Pharaoh’s soldiers. Pharaoh’s daughter found Moses and raised him as her own son, and eventually he ran away from Egypt after he killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite slave. After a few decades, God appeared to Moses in the wilderness in the form of a burning bush, and then he commissioned Moses to go and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses went back to Egypt and demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites, and when Pharaoh refused, God caused ten horrible plagues to come upon the Egyptians. After the death of all the firstborn of Egypt, Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave, but then he changed his mind and sent his armies after them. God brought the Israelites across the Red Sea, and then caused the waters to crash back in and drown Pharaoh’s armies when they also tried to cross. In this way, God delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt, and Moses was the prophet through whom God performed these mighty works.

Moses also did many other miraculous things during his time as God’s chief prophet. He made water come out of rocks when the Israelites needed something to drink, and he caused manna and quail to fall from the sky to give them food. He brought the Ten Commandments down from Mt. Sinai and gave the people the Law, so that they would know how God wanted them to live as his chosen people. And he continued to speak with God on the people’s behalf throughout his entire ministry. Moses’ face shone with the brightness of God’s glory after he spoke with God, so that he needed to wear a veil whenever he was not relaying God’s Word to the people. All of this meant that Moses was a very powerful person indeed, but not because of his own innate abilities. On his own, Moses was just as frail and sinful as any other person, but with God backing him up, he was the greatest and most important prophet who ever lived during the time of the Old Testament.

And yet, even that greatness had its limits. Moses led the people of Israel for over forty years, but eventually his time ran out. When the Israelites arrived at the Promised Land, Moses’ time to lead them had come to an end. God brought him up to the top of Mt. Nebo to show him the land, but then that was it for him. Moses died in the wilderness, and the Lord buried him somewhere out there, but nobody ever found out the exact spot. Joshua the son of Nun ended up taking over for Moses, and he led the people into the Promised Land and helped them achieve victory over their enemies. So even the greatest prophet of the Old Testament was not great enough to accomplish everything the people of God needed. He did not live forever, and he did not bring the people into the land. And he wasn’t powerful enough to keep the Israelites from falling away from the true God, neither during his lifetime nor after he died. If God’s people wanted a prophet who would be able to lead them and keep them strong in the faith for all time, then they would need to find someone even greater than Moses.

And thankfully, God did send someone greater than Moses. About 1400 years or so after Moses died, God raised up a new prophet who would speak his Word to the people and do even mightier works than Moses did. His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and he was not just a prophet, but he was the very Son of God. He proved his greatness over and over again during his ministry by forgiving sins, healing diseases, casting out demons, controlling the weather, and even raising the dead. All of these things he did by his own innate authority; as God himself, he was able to use his own power rather than relying on the power of another. He did not relay to the people what God had told him to say; he spoke his own authoritative commands and promises. He clearly was greater than Moses, and the events recounted in our Gospel text underscore that. One day during his ministry, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain with him, and there his entire body shone dazzling white. When Moses spoke with God, his face shone with God’s glory, but Jesus’ entire body radiated power, and that was without having God speak to him. And then to drive the point home, Moses himself appeared, along with the prophet Elijah, and the two of them spoke with Jesus from a position of subservience. They did not shine with God’s glory; only Jesus did. The Father’s voice from the cloud did not declare that Moses and Elijah were God’s sons; he only said that about Jesus. The point was clear: Jesus was greater than Moses. He shone greater glory than Moses, he did things Moses never could have done, and he was declared to be the Son of God by the Father.

And even in his death, Jesus proved himself to be infinitely greater than Moses. Moses died and was buried in the wilderness, but that’s not what happened to Jesus. After Jesus’ enemies had arrested him, convicted him of blasphemy, and executed him by crucifixion, he was not defeated. Rather, on the third day God raised him from the dead as a vindication of everything Jesus did and claimed about himself. Now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Jesus had proven that he was God’s ultimate prophet, the prophet who was greater than Moses and Elijah and anybody else that God had ever sent to his people. That’s why in our Epistle text, the author to the Hebrews declares that Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses. Moses was faithful in his calling as a servant, which was to proclaim the Word of God and testify to Jesus, who would come later. Jesus himself, however, is faithful as a Son, to inherit lordship over God’s people and rule them with justice and righteousness as God always intended. Thus, God has fulfilled his promise to bring us a prophet greater than Moses in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. In him, we have the greatest and only prophet we will ever need.

Jesus is not just a greater prophet than Moses; he is a fundamentally different one as well. The most famous words that God spoke to his people through Moses were words of Law: the Ten Commandments. God gave the Israelites the rest of his Law through Moses as well: the dietary restrictions, the purity regulations, the sacrificial system, and all of the other ceremonial ordinances that made God’s people unique in the world. It’s no accident that those Old Testament laws are often referred to as the “Law of Moses,” because they came from Moses, and they are most commonly identified with him. By contrast, Jesus did not come as a lawgiver, but rather as a preacher of God’s love and mercy. As it is written in John 1, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus came not to condemn the world, but rather to save the world. He came not to punish sinners, but to forgive them and encourage them to repent and believe in him. Moses’ greatest works were works of destruction: the ten plagues and the destruction of Pharaoh’s armies. Jesus’ greatest works, however, were works of restoration: his atoning sacrifice on the cross to forgive sins and his resurrection from the dead to conquer death. On the last day, he will accomplish even greater works than these: raising his faithful people from the dead and transforming this fallen creation into a perfect new heaven and earth. Moses preached law and judgment; Jesus preaches grace and mercy. For Jesus to be God’s greatest prophet, therefore, means that God’s disposition toward us is loving, generous, and forgiving. He does not punish us as our sins deserve, but rather forgives us and grants us eternal life in his kingdom.

So what this means for us Christians today is that we will not look at God primarily as our lawgiver and judge, but rather as our protector, provider, and Savior. He does indeed give us commands, and he will indeed judge the world on the last day, but that is not his most significant work. The most important thing God has done is to save his people from sin, death, and the devil by the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ. To be sure, God has always been a gracious and kind ruler over his people, as he proved by choosing Israel, rescuing them from slavery, and giving them the Promised Land. But still, the most significant prophet of the Old Testament times is defined by his relationship to God’s Law, whereas Jesus is defined by his relationship to God’s mercy. If, then, the Old Testament people of God could consider him to be their merciful Savior, how much more can we Christians in the New Testament age do the same? We do not have to fear being in the presence of God as the ancient Israelites did, because our God has taken on flesh and walked among us. He comes to us even now in the Sacrament of his Son’s body and blood, manifesting his glory to us sinners and granting us the hope of salvation in his name. Jesus is thus greater than Moses not only because his power is greater, but also because the message that he preaches is infinitely greater as well. The Law may reveal our sins and condemn us, but the Gospel reveals the power of God to forgive those sins and grant eternal life to those who have trusted in him. God’s true power is revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we Christians are privileged to have heard this Gospel and thus have received his promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Thus, the glory of God as revealed to us in Jesus is not something that should frighten or alarm us. Jesus is indeed God, and he does indeed possess the power of God, as Peter, James, and John saw firsthand during his transfiguration. But unlike with the shining face of Moses, the shining person of Jesus does not need to make us fearful or worried that God is going to punish or destroy us. Rather, we know that Jesus uses his divine power to conquer our enemies of sin, death, and the devil, and to grant us eternal life in his kingdom. Moses wit his Law may have been the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, but Jesus with his Gospel is far greater even than Moses was. May we, therefore, recognize the unsurpassable greatness of Jesus, so that we can approach God with confidence and without fear, knowing that he uses his divine power only for our good. He is powerful enough to save us from all who oppose him and his Word, and he has promised in his love and mercy that he will do so indeed. Amen.