

*Texts: Mark 8:27-9:8*

*Subject: Transfiguration*

*Theme: Jesus Leading*

*7 Epiphany; Feb. 23, 2020, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,

Amen.

I want to tell you about what I saw this week. Tuesday morning, we were walking over the border, into Tijuana, Mexico. We were with a delegation of about 200 bishops, pastors, and church leaders, from across the United States, and accompanied by leaders from the Methodist and Lutheran churches in Mexico. We gathered in a place called friendship park, which used to straddle the border wall - where families and friends used to meet, hold hands, share food and gifts. It was originally a simple barbed-wire fence, but in 1994 was renovated to a 14 mile steel barrier. Security increased after 2001, and in 2009 the park was closed down, and a new parallel fence constructed that extends 300 feet into the ocean. The 20 foot border patrol access road cuts through the place where families used to gather for picnics, worship services, yoga classes and more. Access is now controlled by the government, and is opened for limited times on the weekends. The group of Lutherans that was to meet on the U.S. side of the fence, including our Bishop, Deborah Hutterer, was prevented from gathering with us, we were told due to recent flooding. In 2012 a layer of wire mesh was added that keeps anyone from passing their hands or any items through, only allowing for the touching of fingertips. Pastor Heidi Numark preached and shared some of the history of this barrier, and as we gathered in worship, we shared the peace of Christ, not by shaking hands, hugs, or kisses, but by linked fingertips. I knew the time there would be emotional. I knew there would be restrictions. It was not what we expected. It was heart-wrenching.

It was restrictive, imposing. Spotlights and cameras stared at us from tall towers. Then the helicopters showed up. The drone that flew over the gathering of faith leaders hovered to take pictures.

As we shared the bread and wine, we encountered Jesus in that place.

Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall...” We could not help but notice how the ocean crept up and washed away the sand, how the salt air ate away at the steel barrier, and how the winds battered the wall built to mark and restrain a people once united.

It was a transformative experience. To see something like that, to be there and pray with the people and families and workers and those affected by not just the wall, but all the factors that contribute to the mass migrations of the last few years, doesn’t leave you the same. Later that day we spoke with mothers and children at Institution Madre Assunta. Some were fleeing violence, some seeking a better economic future. I talked with a few boys, about the same age as our confirmation class, about their lives. They didn’t speak English, they told me. They had classes available back home, but were not able to learn English in Tijuana since they were at the shelter. One surprise for me was to find mothers from Haiti, and their little ones, migrating through Mexico, to find a better life. The young children played, just like our children do, unaware of the pain of the parents, adapting to the challenges, as their own kind of resistance.

The walls and fences transform the landscape, but not the hearts of the people divided by it. The shelter is a place to breathe, to rest, to seek help and find allies for the struggle ahead. The people of the city go about their days, doing what they can do to provide. Jesus is there.

The question Jesus asks, he asks each of us - who do *you* say that I am?

Even among the disciples at that time, there seemed to be competing theories - Jesus was being compared to John the Baptist, Elijah, maybe one of the minor prophets - scripture notes that Enoch was assumed into heaven, not buried in the earth. Could he have returned? The people are saying lots of things - they like to talk. They might be afraid. They wonder what Jesus is really up to. Peter thought he had it figured out - he correctly claims Jesus is the Messiah. Ding, ding ding! Come on down Peter! You're the big winner! But once Jesus tells them that this means he was going to suffer and die, only to rise again, Peter tries to tell Jesus otherwise.

That's not what they had in mind.

Jesus explains that suffering would be in all their futures. The shame and pain of public execution at the cross would be where Jesus would fulfill God's mission. They still were surprised when it came. They were afraid - how could they not be? Jesus was asking them to lay down their lives too. "For those who want to save their life will lose it." Jesus was leading them down a path they could not have expected, asking them for something they were sure they could give.

Peter tries to reason with the Lord. He doesn't want anything to happen to Jesus, he wasn't going to let anything get in the way of his story, his expectations, his plan for how things were going to go down. With harsh words the Messiah tells him to back down, "Get behind me, Satan!" You think you know what's right? You're only looking after yourself. There's much more at stake here. He has some harsh world for the world too - "this adulterous and sinful generation" - Jesus isn't shy about choosing sides. He is not concerned about overthrowing one empire, but about transforming the whole

cosmos. Jesus doesn't leave Peter there, but gives assurance. Some of you are going to understand this sooner, rather than later.

Then Jesus leads Peter and John up the mountain. At Mount Horeb, you could see a long way - have you been there? I talked with my friend Khader - he's from Beit Jala in Palestine, and is a Pastor in Brooklyn. I asked him what he thought about the wall, and he told me it was just like his home, where a barrier in the West Bank will separate 50 families from their land and livelihoods.

Jesus is the one who frees us, our liberator, the light of the world, the living Word, the Beloved of God, the only begotten Son, the one who saves us from sin, death, and the worst of ourselves. Jesus doesn't demand loyalty, doesn't come to force us to submit, but gives us freedom to love our neighbors, gives us His Word to trust in the goodness and mercy of God, to lead us to faith, that we would see the beauty of God's grace and promises - the Kingdom of God that has come with power. We begin to see this kin-dom as a present reality, when we have faith. We don't trust in the works we do, but in the love that God has given us through a very real cross, on which hangs to Savior of the World. We are in this world and we suffer along with it, but we know and cling to the promise of abundant life God has given us.

Jesus is still leading us, still showing us the way, giving glimpses of the *kin-dom*.

Many of us have been meeting recently and discussing how to invite others into our faith community. We wonder what our future will look like. Some of the ones we have loved have died, some have moved away. We can get frustrated, fearful, and impatient. I feel it too.

Jesus leads Peter and James and John up that mountain, and shows them something. He didn't show everyone. They don't get to stay there and have a party with Moses and Elijah. They're not there to have a conference and meetings about church growth. They get to see the glory and radiance of God, there in Jesus' own face. It's amazing, confusing, bewildering - they're terrified! But the voice of God calms their spirits, instructs them, gives them direction. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."

Listen to Jesus.

That's what we are called to do.

So often, the things we do are motivated by fear, or to avoid pain. There are plenty of things that can make us afraid and angry. We get frustrated and hurt each other. We build walls, fences, and barriers around our hearts. In the face of injustice, many of us stay quiet, try to keep the peace. We confessed the ways we have turned away from people in need, because it was inconvenient to help. We hide our true selves out of fear and self preservation. And all the works we do to glorify ourselves, to make ourselves seem great, to achieve, to earn, to climb social ladders, truthfully is often for empty reasons. Our motivation matters. Who or what is leading our hearts? Is Jesus leading?

We can do anything - we can feed the hungry, welcome everyone in the world, share all we have and serve every soul who comes through our door, but if Jesus is not leading us, then our works are for nothing. They are meaningless, wasted. If we are inviting and desiring to see this church grow it must be for the right reasons. We love our church, we want it to grow, we want to see these old pews filled with friends and neighbors, children, parents, and grandparents. We want to continue to gather with the

ones we love and carry on the legacy of the ones who came before us. I get it. We want others to know they are not alone; that they are loved by God and freed in Jesus to love and serve one another; that grace breaks down human barriers, and crosses borders; that we are ones who get to show God's love and share kindness and compassion; that all nations have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, and given the promise of abundant and eternal life. This is good news. This is the reason Jesus is leading us from here to be the grace living, peace giving, hope sharing body of Christ. Because there are people in this city that are afraid, are in need of a friend, in need of a good neighbor, in need of the hope that we have in Jesus.

Peter and James and John hear the voice of God, and they truly see Jesus. Then they leave. They head back down the mountain, and they get to be ones to share the story, to tell what they've seen, with Jesus leading them all the way to the cross, and beyond. Amen.