

JJ¹

Have you ever played the “Would You Rather...” game? If you haven’t, it’s a game where you give someone silly, even ridiculous options and they have to choose which one they’d rather do or have happen to them. It makes for some good laughs and strange looks. Well, I’ve got a “Would You Rather...” for you today as we look at our Old Testament lesson and the Gospel. Would you rather be terrified, or terrified?

Now you might think that’s a silly “Would You Rather...” since the options are the same. But as we look at these texts before us today, we see the same thing happen. In Exodus we hear that “the appearance of the Glory of the LORD looked like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (Ex. 24:17). A few chapters earlier, Moses says the Israelites “trembled with fear” when the Glory of the LORD descended on the mountain. They even said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Ex. 20:18-19 NIV84).

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Matthew tells us that Peter, James and John “fell face down and were terrified” when they heard God the Father speak from the cloud (Mt. 7:6). So, would you

rather be terrified, or terrified? **WHICH MOUNTAIN WOULD YOU CHOOSE?**

We look at Mt. Sinai, and we’d be terrified too. Thunder, lightening, trumpet blasts that shook you to your core, billowing black smoke and a fire raging worse than anything California has ever seen! To be sure, there were also some glorious things that happened there, though only a handful of people saw it. Earlier in Exodus 24, we’re told that “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Ex. 24:9-11 NIV84).

While amazing, the rest of the people were terrified, at least for a while. But you see, the problem was they were terrified for the wrong reason. What they saw was truly awesome and tumultuous, but it is what the LORD gave on Mt. Sinai that should have terrified them. There on Mt. Sinai, God gave his people the law. That’s why the LORD called Moses onto the mountain in the first place: “Come up to me on the mountain. Wait there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for “Jesus Help”. It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

law and the commands that I have written, so that you can teach them" (Ex. 24:12)

And Moses taught the people and the people again and again replied: "Everything the LORD has said we will do" (Ex. 24:3 NIV84). I'm sure you remember how well that went. At the end of our text from Exodus, we're told Moses was on the mountain with the LORD for 40 days and 40 nights. At the end of that time he came down the mountain to find the people worshipping the golden calf and behaving shamefully.

Is Mt. Sinai the mountain you would choose? Do you want God performing shock-and-awe displays on a mountaintop and making commands of a two-sided covenant? A covenant that said you must do this, that and the other thing and then God will bless you or you're doomed?

Maybe we should try the other mountain. That one doesn't seem so bad. Peter, James and John get to go up with Jesus when suddenly "he was transfigured in front of them. His face was shining like the sun. His clothing became as white as the light. Just then, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus" (Mt. 17:3).

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Here is Jesus appearing more like the Son of God he truly is! And not only that, two heroes of the Old Testament are there too—Moses & Elijah! Peter thinks it's so good, he doesn't want to leave. "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Mt. 17:4).

Peter thought he had found heaven on earth and he wanted to stay there. Jesus was shining in his glory, Moses and Elijah were there too. There was so much Peter, James and John could learn. How wonderful to be away from the problems of the world. How wonderful to be these chosen three! Maybe, friends, you would choose the Mount of Transfiguration. But don't forget, Peter, James and John still end up being terrified on that mountain too.



WHICH MOUNTAIN WOULD YOU CHOOSE? You see, friends, people get all mixed up on which mountain is better. They get all mixed up because of the devil's lies of false glory. We're confronted with two types of false glory every day. The first is a self-glory people think they can find at the first mountain, and the second is a cheap glory people think they can find at the other.

Plenty of people at Jesus' time and today choose the first mountain, choose Mt. Sinai. They try to get glory for themselves through keeping the law. People who want a shock-and-awe God and want to try and appease God through good works to get to heaven. If that's what you'd like, well you're going to be sorely disappointed. In the end you'll be terrified.

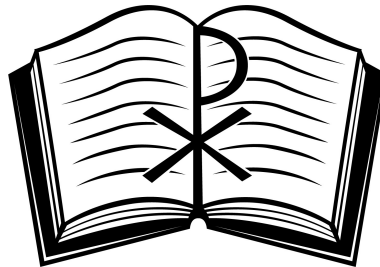
There are also plenty of people who just want the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration. Like Peter, we're tempted to want to take the easy way. The easy way you might say is cheap grace. It's for people just like Peter had been before he understood. It's for people who want Easter without the bother of Good Friday.

Just six days before the events of Transfiguration, Peter's false glory was on full display. Jesus had just told his disciples that he was going to suffer, die and rise again, but "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!' " (Mt. 16:22 NIV84).

Peter wanted the easy way, both for himself and for Jesus. Peter wanted glory now. He didn't want to struggle and strive, but to have it all here on earth. He wanted cheap grace. The problem with that is that it is no grace at all. If you want the cheap grace of warm fuzzies and feel-good messages... If you want the cheap grace that ignores the real

problem and only looks to outward behavior and circumstances for confidence that heaven is yours... Then, friends, you're going to be sorely disappointed. In the end you'll be terrified.

Some want a confused version of the glory of Sinai—shock-n-awe and holy laws to keep. Others want a confused version of the Mount of Transfiguration—glory and ease now. **WHICH MOUNTAIN WOULD YOU CHOOSE?** You know which mountain God chooses? The one God chooses is the mountain no one else would—Calvary.



Bloody—Grim—Dark—Lonely—Humiliating—Calvary.

Now don't get me wrong. God chose to be on those other two mountains. God acted in beautiful glory.

What was wrong with those mountains had nothing to do with God. Everything he did and said was perfect. The problem was sinful mankind. That's why both mountains were only preparatory, not permanent. Sinai was to hedge in God's people to protect them from the false beliefs of the world around them. Sinai and what was given there was meant to incubate a nation so that "when the time had fully come, God [would send] his Son..." (Gal. 4:4 NIV84). Transfiguration was meant to encourage, strengthen and prepare both Jesus and his three closest earthly friends—Peter, James and John.

And how important it was for Peter, James and John, who hadn't been listening all to well lately, to hear the Father speak that day. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Mt. 17:5). How important for you and I to hear those words too.

How important it is for you and I to listen to the one who comes to us and says, "Don't be afraid." He can say those words and not just mean it, but actually do it. He takes our fears away because he chose to go to Mt. Calvary.

It was there on Mt. Calvary that God put his greatest glory on display, and yet, it's completely hidden from the eyes of the unbelieving world. Sometimes even the eyes of believers get a bit clouded and forget that God's greatest glory is found in the cross—and so is ours. It's the greatest glory because in no way is it empty or cheap. It costs him everything.

My favorite professor puts it so well in his book: *The Theology of the Cross*. "... look at [Jesus]...No one helps him in his torment, and he does not want anyone to help him. He does not even help himself, not in the slightest. That's how much he loves us. That's his glory. It is not a glory

to be seen and wondered at. It is a glory that uses every moment to show his love for us. He want us to see and know that the price he pays for our salvation is full price, not bargain-basement, knock-off cheap. The suffering decreed for the sinner already in the Garden of Eden was real. The suffering, therefore, of the one who stands now in the place of sinners must be real too."²

Friends, what Peter said is true. It is good for us to be here today because it prepares us Lent and it prepares us for life in this sinful world which we're just passing through on our way home to heaven. We've been brought on top of two mountains today so that we'd be prepared to ascend another mountain with our Lord—Calvary. We know that's the most important mountain of them all because it is only through the cross that one day we shall be received into the glory of heaven. How wonderful to know that we don't face a "Would You Rather" of being terrified, or terrified. Rather, through faith we are justified, sanctified and shall at last be glorified! Amen.

SDG³

² Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, NPH 2008, p. 257.

³ SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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