

- The third lesson is from the Gospel according to St. Luke. The ninth chapter. Now about 8 days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James. And went upon the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed. And his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly, they saw two men: Moses and Elijah talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure. Which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep. But since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings. One for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not knowing what he had said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then, from the cloud came a voice that said, "this is my son. My chosen. Listen to him." When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen. This is the word of the Lord.

- Let us pray. Gracious God, descend your Holy Spirit upon us, speak through me; if necessary, in spite of me, and always beyond me. Hide the preacher in the shadow of the cross, that your word might be heard by your people this day. In name of Jesus, we pray, Amen. Who is this 'Jesus?' He is a figure of endless fascination, in part because of the legacy that he has left over 2,000 years. Scholars have engaged in quest to try to understand who he was in the first century. Books have been written, movies have been filmed, TV shows, and documentaries, all seeking to understand who is this 'Jesus?' He is, after all, an interesting character. Four Gospels within scripture and additional apocryphal gospels have been written about him, and even in the first century during the time of his ministry, people were fascinated by that question. Who is this Jesus? A charismatic teacher? A prophet? A miracle worker? A healer? When Jesus would come to the neighborhood, crowds would come out. An intriguing figure; who is this Jesus? Well, we wanna know and often what we really want is to find someone who can touch us in the ways we really want to be touched. We create a Jesus in our own image. Someone we can like, someone we can enjoy, someone we can have as our co-pilot on the airplane flight of life. A century ago, Albert Schweitzer noted that even the best of scholars, when they sought to understand the historical Jesus, often ended up describing Jesus in ways that look remarkably like the authors of the books. How often, the Jesus we end up with is a Jesus that we want. And yet, that Jesus is also in tension with the one we really need. You see, the Jesus is one who can call us out of the predicaments that we find ourselves in. Who can offer hope in the midst of despair. Joy in the midst of grief, love in the midst of division and hatred. But are we prepared for that kind of Jesus? Are we prepared for the Jesus that we need? Well beyond the Jesus that we want? The time comes to all of us when we realize that an optimistic assessment of the world just isn't enough. Sometimes it's because of things we do. Perhaps it happened as a child, or as a youth and we engaged in some kind of experiment, or undertook some kind of act of rebellion that we found ourselves out in the far country and wondering whether our parents or our families or our friends might ever welcome us back, might ever offer us forgiveness. Or is it the case that once we fall, we fall for life? Maybe it was in young adulthood, or as an adult when we discover that the world isn't quite as malleable as we hoped. When a child suffered and died, when a spouse

betrayed us, when a boss failed us, when we experienced a tragic death of a loved one, and we begin to wonder whether the world makes any sense, whether there is any meaning or purpose beyond the suffering that happens to us. Whether it is things we've done, sins we've committed, or whether it is things that have been done to us, that have marked and scarred and wounded us and left those wounds open and festering. We wonder whether there is a Jesus we need. Someone who rises above the circumstances and the divisions of our life, who offers that hope, that joy, that love. We encounter in our gospel lesson for this morning the story of the transfiguration that powerful that story that comes right on the hinge, that displays the tension between the Jesus we want and the Jesus we need. When they get to the mountain, Jesus is transfigured. His robes become dazzling in white, a sign of the heavens and of holiness. The disciples look and behold him rising above Moses and Elijah, fulfilling and transcending all that was told in the law and the prophets, and Peter wanting to find a way to manage the situation, said "Hey, this is pretty neat, let's keep it this way. Let's build some booths and let's stay up here, I like it this way. Peter had a Jesus he wanted. But this Jesus, is one who is on the way to Jerusalem, whose glory and whose robes that are so dazzling in white, are going to be washed in the blood of the cross. On that journey to Jerusalem, we discover that the Jesus we need is one who journeys unto suffering and death, on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and that the glory of Easter comes only through that encounter, not in bypassing it. This Jesus whom we encounter in the transfiguration, isn't simply a nice guy, a wonderful teacher, a miracle worker, for the heavens open up and God declares, "This is my beloved son, listen to him." We ready to listen to the one who calls us to journey with Jesus through Lent, on the journey to Jerusalem? Are we willing to listen to the Jesus, not only as he enters triumphantly on Palm Sunday, but he is betrayed and abandoned, and left hanging on a cross? In the days of Civil Rights in Georgia, Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia farm. He also is the author of the Cotton Patch Gospels. Jordan, through the people of the Koinonia Farm and the Koinonia community, was embarked on a process of trying to bring about racial reconciliation, trying to offer those signs of hope and joy and love in the midst of the racism and the oppression and the suffering that was still prevalent. And as might be expected when he was trying to embark on that ministry of reconciliation. They encountered all kinds of opposition and hatred, in the surrounding areas and they were being attacked by the Klan and by other agents of suffering. They got to a point where Jordan realized they needed some legal assistance. And so he went to his brother, who was involved in Georgia State Politics at the time. He went to his brother and said "we need your assistance." His brother said, "I can't provide it." And Clarence said, "Why not? We need it. You see what's happening to us; we need this ministry, we need the legal aid that you can provide me." He said, "you know if I do it right now, it'll compromise my career, and I've got delicate relationships in the legislature and in politics, and I just can't take that kind of a risk." And Clarence said to him, "Well, what about your following of Jesus?" His brother just looked at him and then Clarence said "I remember very distinctly that day when we were young teenagers and both of us went down to the altar of the Baptist Church we were members of and we dedicated our lives to Jesus, what does that have to do with whether you take a risk?" Clarence's brother looked at him and he said, "Well," he said "I don't really consider myself a follower of Jesus, I prefer to think of myself as an admirer of Jesus." Well, I have to confess that there's a part of me that would rather be an admirer of Jesus, than a follower." To be an admirer means that I can keep my distance, I can look and behold his beauty, even his transfigured appearance from afar. I can rest content at that distance, with the Jesus I want. Without recognizing the Jesus I need. What the gospel tells us, is that the only we can really understand who this Jesus is, is if we embark on discipleship. If we are following Jesus, then we will be in a better position to understand him,

and to understand the depths of what we need, and to discover the riches of what God offers unto us. You see, the transfiguration points us to the son of God, the sinless one, the one who breaks apart all the ways in which we diminish and destroy ourselves and one another. Because, he is the one who rises above our sin, and he is the one who offers us the forgiveness that wipes away the burdens of the past, and offers the possibilities for new life. The novelist Iris Murdoch, said in one of her novels, "A saint is someone who absorbs evil, without passing it on." It's a challenge isn't it? To be able to absorb what we do, to be able to absorb what is done to us; without then passing it on to others? The one who has done that perfectly is the one who stands on the Mount of Transfiguration; robes in dazzling white, who absorbs all of our sin, all of our destructiveness, all of our evil, but rather than passing it on, offers forgiveness to us. But we can only really receive that forgiveness if we get close to him. If we avoid the temptation to be admirers, and instead become followers. Because it is in being befriended by Christ, by being found in Christ's good company, that we discover what true glory really is. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, read just a few minutes ago, Paul says "We, who have beheld Christ, are being conformed, changed into this image, changed from one degree of glory to another. It's a glorious image that we also are being transformed by Christ. Not from afar, but by being found in Christ's company. Not because of who we are, but because of whose we are. Because it is the work of the Lord, the work of the spirit of the Lord; to touch us, to transform us, to redeem us, to take our lives, to pick them up in their scattered fragments, and to meld them into a new life." In that transformation of glory, we discover that there is nothing so whole as a broken and redeemed heart. Nothing so strong as the fragments of a life redeemed by the glory of Christ and brought together into a new life. What God in Christ calls us to is a journey through suffering, through pain, through dying; a journey through Holy Week, that begins this Wednesday. Throughout Lent, culminating in the drama of Holy Thursday and Good Friday, so that on Easter Sunday, all those of us who grieve, all those of us who suffer, all those of us who carry the burdens of the past around with us, weighed down by the miseries of life. In other words, all of us who live will be equipped to sing the Easter Hallelujah, because we have beheld the transfigured Christ, and because we have been changed. We have beheld that glory in a way that reflects onto us. And that reflected glory then can shine in our own lives. Dorothy Day used to say she wanted to live her life in a way that just wouldn't make sense if God doesn't exist. That's what following Jesus is all about. Living in ways that don't make sense, unless, we've discovered God's forgiveness. Unless, we've discovered God's love. Unless, we've discovered the joy that comes in the kind of music that this choir and the organ plays, week after week, that calls us out of ourselves into the praise of God. It doesn't make sense, unless, we have beheld the glory of the Christ we need, rather than the Christ we want. In recent years, this has been displayed in a powerful way, in the musical *Les Misérables*. Many of you have seen it, the story of Jean Valjean, a man who had been imprisoned, who had suffered for what he did, and then what had been done to him, even after he paid his time, he thought he would be free, but, no, he was still marked with a number two-four-six-o-one, that was carried with him, until he encountered one of those saints, a bishop of dean, who forgives him, and as he sends him forth, says, "Remember, you've been claimed by God, live differently." Valjean struggles with that, struggles to live into a different future, but he knows he's been claimed. He begins to show some of that reflected glory as he struggles to unlearn and to get rid of the mark that wore him down, and to bear witness to that forgiving and redeeming love, and he does it in relationship after relationship, it doesn't mean he avoids struggle, it doesn't mean he avoids pain, or confrontation with sin, but he continues to bear witness, through it and above it, and in the final scene, you see, as the music is playing in the background, the lighting shines on his face, and he is in a white robe, bearing witness to the

ways in which he has been changed, from one degree of glory into another. And then someone sings to him, to love another person, is to see the face of God, not sentimental love, but Jesus love. A suffering love, a costly love. We behold the glory of Christ in the transfiguration. And as we behold that glory, not from afar, but in the midst of seeking to follow Jesus, that glory reflects onto us. And as we seek to live faithful, to this gracious and wondrous God, we are changed, from one degree of glory into another. I don't know how you've been marked in life, whether it's with a number, whether it's with something that you did as a child, or a youth, or a young adult, or something that you did yesterday, whether it's with something that's been done over and over again to you, that weighs you down, whatever it is, the transfigured Christ calls you into a new way of life. To be set free from the burdens by his forgiveness. To enter into his good company. Who is this Jesus? He is the one, whose glory shines forth into our lives, and calls us not simply to admire, but to follow him, this day, and all our days. Thanks be to God. Amen.