

March 2, 2025

Transfiguration Sunday

“Your Context”

Luke 9:28-36

Many times while studying hermeneutics at seminary—that is the study of the text and language of the Bible—my professors would say that to understand rightly “context is key.” This meant that the text surrounding a word or phrase very much helped define what it meant. That works very well in ancient texts. There are some Hebrew words in the Old Testament for which scholars had zero definitions because they were found nowhere else than the Bible. Their meanings are completely deduced by the immediate surrounding context.

Human beings behave very much on the same principle. Our context, the civilization and culture that surrounds us, very much serves to define us.

This was true for Peter, James, John and the rest of Christ’s disciples. The legalistic teachings of the Pharisees and the ritualistic paying for sins through right sacrifices at the temple was the teaching of their culture and they had fully bought into it. This is why they were so perplexed and amazed by the radical teachings of Christ. His teaching of things like humility, lowliness, service, repentance clashes with the culture that praised raising oneself up by righteous works of the law and a whole lot more. According to their context, Yahweh had already provided all that was necessary to be right with God.

The transfiguration of Jesus blows all that up. Jesus’ appearance is altered and He is clothed in divine whiteness, leaving no doubt that Jesus is of God. Then there is Moses and Elijah—the law and the prophets on which that Jewish context was supposedly built—but their talking with Jesus about the “exodus” He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem! They are, and truthfully always were—looking and pointing forward to Christ and His salvation work!

Then with Peter beginning to babble like an idiot, their context is blown to smithereens! A cloud—a longtime sign of the presence of God—comes over them and the voice booms forth, *“This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”*

The context they knew, the context that informed their understanding of things, really doesn’t matter anymore. God says to listen to Jesus. Jesus trumps everything. Later, when the crucifixion, death and resurrection in Jerusalem Jesus predicted just before this mountaintop episode takes place, there will be no doubt. Jesus is Lord, the Son of God. After His ascension, especially after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the only context that matters for these men will be the context of salvation in Christ Jesus.

*“This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”* These words are not only for Peter, James and John. The revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, for our salvation is for all people. For everyone who receives this truth it shatters the context of the world; redefines the standing and influence of the culture around us in light of salvation in Christ.

But the context around us doesn’t go away. The culture, steeped in the sin of the world, is the one in which we live every day. And we are tempted to partake of it, aren’t we... asks the pastor in the middle of Mardi Gras season in south Louisiana.

When I first arrived here and was puzzled about what Mardi Gras was all about, a member of this congregation explained it to me this way: “Mardi Gras is so that people can get all their sinning done before they have to be good for Lent.” While I don’t believe this is truly how folks view Carnival, it’s a great example about how the culture influences our thinking when it comes to God.

Our free American context tells you that your life belongs to you to do with as you wish. This context tells you that if you play your cards right, you can manage God, doing enough good to appease Him while still taking part in the sins you enjoy; you know, kind of dealing with God as we do the government, driving 8 mph over the speed limit because that's not so fast that they'll really give you a ticket. That Mardi Gras thinking says it's okay to do the sin, so long as you're really sorry about it later.

The context of business might suggest a certain amount of greed and dishonesty is acceptable. Today's context of "companionship" suggests sexual intimacy is fine so long as there is the least bit of desire masquerading as caring. Our social context suggests you are free to gossip and rip all over someone's reputation so long as you believe it's in the least bit true. Our present context lures us in all sorts of directions, justifying sin and lack of love for God and neighbor.

*"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"* God the Father speaks these words to you. And while Jesus does have a lot to say about shunning evil and sin, that isn't why His words blow up your context. The holy law has been around since the beginning. Moses and Elijah had that covered. What changes everything is what Jesus says about Himself.

*"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."* Jesus preaches salvation. Jesus preaches the Gospel. Jesus preaches eternal life through the forgiveness of sin and dies and rises to make it so. But Jesus makes clear this path is not through being in harmony with the world, making accommodation for the sin that is part and parcel of its context. Jesus calls you to follow, and following Christ means loving God and loving neighbor to the point of humbling and denying yourself...the way Christ, the one you follow, does.

This love blows up our context...every day, because the world doesn't operate like this. Last week I preached about this, how tough it is for us to listen to Him say "love your enemies and bless those who curse you". Yet this is following Jesus to salvation, because it's what Jesus did for you. This is forgiving others all offenses, because this is what Jesus did for you. Our context teaches that offenses must be punished, enemies fought and triumphed over and those who curse us deserve our hatred. Jesus did none of that to you.

*"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"* These Word of the Father booming from heaven are not at all unclear. But they are not harsh, commanding law. They are gracious invitation spoken over the One He sent to take away your sins. These are intended to shatter your worldly context, blow up your earthly life...to give you a better life, eternal life, perfect life in the Christ of God sent to redeem you from death.

Your context being shattered is a good, gracious work of the Holy Spirit. He has done it in your baptism, does it today in the Supper, does it continually as His Word has its way with you and draws you close to Him in repentance, prayer and forgiveness.

No matter what your circumstance, don't let the voice of your earthly context in life determine who you are. Context is key. Your context is defined by Christ's life, death, resurrection and His reigning as your King and Savior this day and forevermore.

Amen.