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Festival of the Transfiguration of Our Lord One Year Series 2017

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Feast of the Transfiguration, Feb 5

Do you like the picture? It is by Raphael and is found in the Vatican. The event recorded in the Gospel reading has inspired a great deal of art, some of it even good. Much to notice in this picture: Jesus is floating, not sure what is up with that, but then Moses and Elijah are as well. The disciples on the hill with Jesus are overwhelmed by the holiness of it all, but check out the scene below. Raphael has had to compress some of the distance for us. The child-demoniac of Mark 9 shows up here. It is just as overwhelming below as it is above, but for different reasons. Some point at Jesus, others point at the demoniac.

Luther did not preach this Sunday, or at least not this Sunday's readings. This seems to reflect a change in the one year pericope from Luther's day. I am recycling some material from the series A treatment of this Sunday. Those of you using the three year lectionary will find this coming up at the end of the month.

The Transfiguration was obviously important to the authors of the NT and the Holy Spirit who inspired them. That said, I am not entirely certain that I have ever really grasped this day. It is one of those days which seem to elude the preacher, at least this one. Sometimes I get something really right, but other times I have felt much more like babbling Peter.

In our prior treatments of this text we have wondered if this is really a time to preach the presence of Christ in worship. Are we in the presence of this Jesus who shines like the sun in the reading today? Peter did not understand that very well. Are our people equally befuddled about being in the presence of Christ when they come to worship? Is this Sunday really an opportunity to unpack the Sunday experience and tell our folks that Jesus comes down the hill with us from this experience into the mundane and everyday lives that we lead, rendering them holy?

In the Gospel reading, God reveals Jesus to these three disciples. In this worship, God reveals Jesus to us. Peter says, "It is good that we are here." and he is going to try and somehow contain this event, and God intervenes with voice and cloud. Does he do this to prevent Peter's plans? Is this hour on Sunday a time of fear or of rejoicing for us? Those would seem to be the only options, but so many of our folks come to this worship event blasé and expecting nothing and not having that expectation challenged by anything they see or hear. Do they feel either the fear or the joy? Do they confess with Peter that it is good to be here? Is that enough for this day?

We also noticed another interesting factotum. In the cross we either see Jesus alone, or with two others. We see Jesus with two others here today. On Good Friday it will not be Moses and Elijah but two malefactors. How is it that this passage/event mirrors that event and proclaims that Cross to us and our hearers?



Collect of the Day

O God, by the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In that voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

As you can see there is a lot going on with this prayer and this day. Two major themes are brought forward here. The Epiphany theme of the revelation of Christ, testimony of Moses and Elijah and the voice from heaven, yet the Lenten theme of Jesus' glory in the cross which brings us to the fullness of our inheritance is also found here.

Transfiguration stands as a bridge between the season of Epiphany and the Paschal season which begins on Wednesday, March 5. It occupies both seasons and can be preached profitably as the transition between them both. Jesus has been shown to be the Son of God, and now he is coming down from this mountain to set his face for Jerusalem and the death and resurrection which await him there. The revelation of Epiphany makes the sacrifice of Holy Week meaningful.

The prayer reflects that forward and backward view of the day. It casts one eye back to the epiphany and another forward to the cross. The Jesus who is revealed, is revealed as the one who goes to a cross to die for us. He is the culmination of the Mosaic Law with its sacrifices and prophetic witness and nowhere is that more important to see than at Calvary.

The mysteries of the faith are the incarnation and the death and resurrection of Christ. We call this a mystery because a lifetime of contemplation, indeed a millennium of contemplation will not exhaust or comprehend these things. God has come into the flesh, God has gone to a cross, Death is undone. Moses and Elijah both had mountain top experiences which brought them to this Jesus. It is arguable that both of them were spared death that they might be here. (I know, it says Moses died, but then says no one ever saw the tomb or the body, God buried him. Ancient Jewish traditions asserted that he did not really die.) Elijah certainly did skip the dying thing and was brought straight to heaven. Was he being preserved alive just for this day?

The prayer also speaks of our adoption as sons. The Voice declares that Jesus is God's Son, the very thing that is spoken of us in the rite of baptism, a word which will be manifest on the last day when we will shine like the stars (Philippians).

Readings

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them.

³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

(This account appears in the three year cycle in Year B as we consider the Transfiguration. That last fell on Feb. 15, 2015. Here are my notes from that week.)

People in the presence of God are transfigured or changed. Moses' encounter with God changed his appearance, interestingly, like Jesus he glowed, at least his face did. Paul is still talking about it centuries later in II Corinthians. When Jesus is revealed on the mountain even his clothes shine. What is the message for us today? Are we also transfigured by the presence of Christ? Does our face somehow shine or glow? Herb Hoefler used to say that he could pick out a Christian in India – the Christian had hope and it showed up in the way he carried himself, the way he approached life. There is a Country Western group with a song that asks, "Does it say Christian on my face?"

Does the Transfiguration actually give us a chance through the eyes of these witnesses a peek behind the veil of Christ's humanity to see the reality which, even reflected, was too much for Moses' people to bear those many years ago. He glows in the face because he encountered God in those conversations. Would we all glow in the presence of Christ too? Does the Transfiguration actually give us just a peek at what Moses saw there? What will we see for an eternity in heaven where there is no sun or moon for Jesus is the Light of the World? We will see what Moses sees in this text.

This story gives us a picture of Moses coming down the hill after he sees God. He also, like Jesus in the story today, glows. His face must be veiled before the people can bear it. Jesus will shine with this light tonight, but not the reflected light which adorned Moses' face, the light of transfiguration belongs to Jesus.

Moses will become then a symbol of the Old Covenant. His face must be veiled. The New Testament will suggest that this is the great contrast between the two. Jesus is unveiled, no more do we need to have the light shielded lest our eyes be burned by it.

The challenge for the preacher seems to me to be that we often feel much more like Moses folks, Jesus seems veiled to us and we wish that we could stand on that mountain peak. But Jesus is certain, the greater light is not to be found there, it is found in the valley below where he will cast out a demon and on a hill to which he sets his face, a hill called Golgatha.

We see the light today, in the proclamation of kingdom come and in a sacrament in which we can take in God himself in this bread and wine, this body and blood. And yet we pine for more,

a more which will be revealed on the last day and the day in which we are welcomed into heaven, a place where there is no need for sun or moon because the Lamb of God is there to give it light.

There is nothing wrong with the pining for the more, as long as it does not come at the expense of the now. Right now the Jesus of the plain, the Jesus who comes down the hill to heal and help, that Jesus is right here, for us. If we look ahead only to the future glory of Jesus, we are really missing the point of this text.

Or

Exodus 3:1-14

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

(This reading is used in the 27th proper of Series C in the three year pericope. That often is superceded by All Saints Day in our observance of the Church year. Here are the notes from the last time I treated it.)

This important and complex text is part of the root stock of the Old Testament and the faith of the children of Abraham, including Christians who are also children of Abraham. Of course this is the launch point of the Exodus, the event which defines God's OT people. Read Exodus 20 and you will see that one keeps the Ten Commandments because the LORD is the God who brought us up out of the land of Egypt.

We might notice that God's timing was strange. The people of Israel had been suffering a very long time. He was watching and observing this the whole time. The cry of the Israelites did not fall on deaf ears, but now, 80 years after Moses own brush with death and the hands of Pharaoh, God was finally doing something about it. How many Israelite infants died waiting for this day? What does this say about God? What does this say about his work on our behalf? Surely it is not always on our time table!

The slavery of the Israelites is a very contemporary thing. Lots of people are physically in slavery today. But many are also enslaved to their own sins and troubles. Some are enslaved to broken and really monstrous systems. Think of the poor folks who live under the tyranny of the drug lords in the border lands of Mexico. Think about the people who toil in the bleak kingdom of North Korea. Think about the man who is trapped in a job which has not hope for him, or a homeless man who is enslaved to his situation. Without money he cannot get the education the jobs require. Without the education he cannot get the job to earn the money to pay for the education. It is often a vicious cycle, a slavery of another sort

God notices the slavery and does something about it. He heard the cries of those folks, he hears the cries and notices the plight of people today. This is not a different God than our God. It often seems to us that our prayers fall on deaf ears. The grieving parents of the Israelites in Egypt who prayed for decades without apparent relief must have felt the same way. I cannot explain God's responses, I can only trust him.

He calls Moses. God rarely does what we think he should do. Calling an 80 year old shepherd is not the first course of action we might take. But then again, an infant lying in the manger looks like a most unlikely Savior. A carpenter hanging on a cross, a piece of wood hewn by carpentry, doesn't look like our victor and messiah, but a loser.

God's call is almost always extended to the unwilling. Moses does not self-appoint, but tries to get out of it. Just because we don't want to do what God wants us to do is not a disqualification! God supplies what is necessary, what is more, as he told Moses, "I will go with you – that is all you really need."

This last point is important. This is the paradigm call event in the OT. All other prophetic and pastoral calls stand in the shadow of this event. Notice that Moses does not want to go. Anyone who seeks the office of prophet/preacher is almost disqualified by the desire for the office. (I sometimes think we could solve a lot of issues in presidential politics this way, if you want the job, you are disqualified.) I always tell my students on campus that if anyone ever declares themselves to be a prophet or a preacher on their own authority in their presence their first act

should be to put their hand on their wallet and hang on tight. He's probably going to go for your money first. Is that cynical of me? Probably. Is it true a disturbing amount of the time? Absolutely.

Moses does not want to go. This is reasonable on his part, the excuses he gives are the sorts of things that would give us pause before electing someone to the board of elders at our parish. He is 80 years old after all and still working the shepherd thing. What is more he has spent time in that court of Pharaoh and that did not go so well. God has, however, another flock for him to shepherd through the dry deserts of Sinai. He calls.

I think that another important point is the whole issue of holiness. Moses must take his shoes off. He hides his face. This is not a safe place. While I think this can certainly be overdone, I really do believe that we have gone too far in the other direction with chummy worship and a casual attitude toward the things of Church. Is there still a way to have holy places, holy times, and holy people? Our friends in Orthodoxy and Catholicism might have something to teach us about that. If you forget someone on Christmas morning, in Portland you can always run down to the airport and shop in the stores there which are required to be open every day of the year. Do we really need a place to be open on Christmas day? Is there a call for holy people these days? What does it mean to be a holy person? What about the altar in our churches? Is that a holy place? Why or why not?

The last point of this text is the one that will get picked up by Jesus in Luke 20 and Matthew 22. Moses finally asks just who it is that is sending him. What name shall he give? This was actually a very provocative question for Moses to ask. Names were a very important thing in the ancient world. To know the name of something is to have power over it. By asking for God's name, Moses was really seeking something powerful. God's enigmatic answer has given people of faith occasion to think for millennia. "I AM WHO I AM" In Hebrew "ehyeh, asher ehyeh."

What makes this so interesting is that when Moses shows up and the people ask him this question, he does not respond with these exact words. He uses the form which is in the material which immediately follows these words. In effect he conjugates the verb. It comes out "Yahweh asher Yahweh" or in English, "He is who he is." It would seem that only God can use that phrase in the first person. We can only say it in the third or perhaps the second person if we find ourselves confronted by him. This is why Jesus will get into so much trouble in the first century. The Septuagint had translated this phrase I AM, but they had used an unusual construction to do it. "Ego eimi" normally Greek would have just used "eimi." Because this is a conjugated language, the verb contains the pronoun, to distinguish this from the others, they included the emphatic pronoun here. When Jesus starts to use this word in his many "I am..." phrases in the Gospels, he always inserts the "Ego." This is why they are so upset with him after what seems like rather innocuous statements on his part. When Jesus declares "I am the bread of life" we should almost have "I AM the bread of life" in our text to indicate just how oddly he says this and to what the crowds are reacting.

This will show up in the Gospel text's cited above, however in a slightly different way. There the issue will not be that Jesus uses the "I AM" but he will make a very interesting and subtle point based on the tense of the verb.

II Peter 1:16-21

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Luther

Here St. Peter refers to an account in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 17:1-9, where we read that Jesus took with Him three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John,...Now this is what Peter wants to say: What preach to you about Christ and His coming, the Gspel we proclaim, has not been made up or invented by us. Nor has it been taken from clever writers of myths, who know how to speak splendidly about everything (as the Greeks did in that day.) For these are purely fables, fairy tales, and idle talk, which they cleverly fabricate and in which they try to be wise. We did not listen to such people. Nor did we follow them, that is, we do not teach trumpery of men, but we are certain that our message is from God. We saw it with our eyes and heard it with our ears, namely, when we were on the mountain with Christ and beheld and heard His glory.

Now every preacher should be so sure of having and preaching God's Word that he would even stake his life on this, since it is a matter of life for us. He should not be in doubt. Now no man is so holy that he would dare die on the strength of the doctrine he himself has taught. Therefore it is established here that the apostles were assured by God that their Gospel was God's Word. And here it is also shown that the Gospel is nothing else than a sermon about Christ.

Accordingly, one should listen to no other sermon; for the Father wants no other sermon. "This is my beloved Son," He says; "listen to Him. He is your Teacher." It is as if He were saying: "If you listen to Him, you have listened to Me." Therefore Peter now says: We have proclaimed and made known to you that Christ is a Lord, that He rules over all things, that also power belongs to Him, and that he who believes in Him also has all this power. We have not invented

this ourselves; but we have seen and heard it through the revelation of God, who has commanded us to listen to this Christ.

Vs. 19 – Here St. Peter goes to the core of the matter and wants to say: The whole purpose of my preaching is to make your conscience sure and to give your heart a firm footing from which it should not permit itself to be torn, in order that both you and I may be certain that we have God's word. For the Gospel is a serious business. It must be grasped and retained in all purity, without any addition or false doctrine. For this reason St. Peter now begins to write against human doctrines.

Vss. 20-21

Here St. Peter attacks false doctrine. Since you know that we have God's Word, he says, cling to this knowledge and do not be misled by other false teachers, even though they come with the allegation that they, too, have the Holy Spirit. With these words all the fathers who interpret Scripture in their own way are refuted, and their interpretation is invalidated. It is forbidden to rely on such interpretation. If Jerome or Augustine or anyone of the fathers has given his own interpretation, we want none of it...The Holy Spirit himself must expound Scripture. Otherwise it must remain unexpounded. Now if anyone of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it should be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case I must not believe him.

Thus Peter attacks even the most estimable and competent teachers. Therefore we dare not believe anyone who presents his own explanation and interpretation of Scripture.

(Luther's Works, Vol. 30. CPH. Pp. 162-167.)

Here are my notes on this passage from the last time Transfiguration came up in the three year cycle:

(Richard Bauckham wrote a book entitled "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses" (Eerdmans, 2008) which might make an interesting read for you sometime. Bauckham suggests that the most reasonable way to understand the whole NT is that it was written while the eye witnesses of Christ were still alive.)

This is a most interesting passage. Peter alludes to his presence on the mountain top with Jesus in the Gospel lesson. That must have been a memorable experience for him which showed up often in his preaching. The Bible even says that he got a little nutty up there, almost out of his mind. Other than the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, this is about the only reflection on it; although, some have suggested that Revelation functions as another sort of Transfiguration vision for John. Peter gets to see Jesus in his glory with Moses and Elijah, the two pillars of the Jewish faith. And yet he says that we have something even surer, the prophecy of the OT whose authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

That gives me occasion to think about myself and my own approach to Scripture. I think we often want that experience which Peter had. We find our Bibles and the proclaimed Word of God to be somewhat passé, but Peter suggests that it is actually better than the experience itself.

Does that change the way you read your OT? Does that change the way you read the whole Bible? Is it better to have been there and to have seen the miracles which Jesus performed or is it better to have the apostolic witness, testimony, and interpretation of those events which comes to us in holy writ? Does the part of me that really wishes I could have seen the feeding of the multitudes and tasted that bread or watched the lame walk and the blind rejoice in their sight, is that part of me stupid? Is that in fact a part of me that is trying to escape the uncertainty of faith that dogs my post-enlightenment life? Are we in fact better off having the disciples thoughtful, faithful, and spirit-led reflections on these events than they were in being there?

In John 20, Jesus called all of us who believe without seeing blessed, something he does not say to Thomas in the upper room in that week after Easter. Have I just got a serious case of “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence,” when I long to see the miracles that Peter saw? Or in fact, do I get to see those miracles and more, (John 14:12) but my mind and attitude shaped by the enlightenment has simply dismissed the miracle with some explanation and thereby dismissed the presence of God in much of my life? What does all this mean? Does anyone else sometimes finding themselves wishing we could have been there?

The dinner with God on Mt. Sinai with the seventy elders of Israel sounds like it must have been quite the event. I think I would have enjoyed that one too.

How do we recapture the sense of holy awe when we come to text and worship? I suppose a shining cloud and a deep voice that knocks me flat would be a good start. But instead we get a Jesus who puts his hand on our shoulder and says, “Don’t be afraid.” We have an Elijah experience of God, not in the fire and wind and earthquake, but in the quiet voice. Our folks are going to have an experience of God forgiving their sins, eating and drinking his body and blood, hearing his voice in the Scripture and sermon. Why is that not enough for us? Are we just the generation with “itching ears” that Paul spoke of in II Timothy?

Do we need fireworks to have God? The disciples had one night of this, and three years of walking dusty roads with Jesus.

Why do we come to worship? Is it not because Jesus is there? Does he not refresh and make us new in this hour? How do we make that come alive for them in worship and preaching?

Peter believed that he had the OT Scriptures more firmly confirmed because of his experience with Christ. If you want to explore this more you might want to look at Luke 24:27 and 44-45 in which Luke speaks of Christ opening the minds of the Disciples to understand the OT Scriptures in a different way. Another interesting point along these lines is to look at the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts in which he begins with Isaiah 53 and explains the Christ and faith to this man.

The Transfiguration served Peter here as a part of his argument, the logic, of what he was saying. It also seems to serve as something which establishes his authority to answer this question. He has seen.

What does the Transfiguration do for us? Peter would have us believe his witness and read more carefully the OT and presumably his words to us as well. But that can hardly exhaust the purpose of Transfiguration for us today. Does this simply give us a reason to question our very human desire for a mountain-top experience? As we look around, we might see pastors who are zip-lining into church, rock concerts on a stage, but is all this effort to create a mountain-top experience really distracting us from the reality of the absolution and the sacrament, in which Christ is there, promised by God, secured by the very Word of God.

Peter says he has evidence. But many are not looking for evidence. The people who are looking for an experience of Christ, will not likely be convinced by that. What is more, Peter is still talking about this experience 30 years later. But he exhorts his reader to a deeper and more careful reading of the Bible. One cannot deny experience on this day, but one can hear the fellow who had the experience tell us that the experience drove him back into his OT Scriptures, a scripture made surer by the experience.

Matthew 17:1-9

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." ¹⁰ And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" ¹¹ He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands."

¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Luther

(In 1525, in the middle of a lengthy sermon series on Exodus, Luther preached an important sermon how Christians should understand Moses. This excerpt picks up in the middle of that sermon.)

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ.

This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. The first thing, namely, the commandments, does not pertain to us. I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith. For things take place in the kingdom of Christ just as I read in Moses that they will; therein I find also my sure foundation.

In this manner, therefore, I should accept Moses, and not sweep him under the rug: first because he provides fine examples of laws, from which excerpts may be taken. Second, in Moses there are the promises of God which sustain faith. As it is written of Eve in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head," etc. Again Abraham was given this promise by God, speaking thus in Genesis 22:18, "In your descendants shall all the nations be blessed"; that is, through Christ the gospel is to arise... Many are these texts in the Old Testament, which the holy apostles quoted and drew upon.

But our factious spirits go ahead and say of everything they find in Moses, "Here God is speaking, no one can deny it; therefore we must keep it." So then the rabble go to it. Whew! If God has said it, who then will say anything against it? Then they are really pressed hard like pigs at a trough. Our dear prophets have chattered thus into the minds of the people, "Dear people, God has ordered his people to beat Amalek to death" [Exod. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17-19]. Misery and tribulation have come out of this sort of thing. The peasants have arisen, not knowing the difference, and have been led into this error by those insane factious spirits.

Had there been educated preachers around, they could have stood up to the false prophets and stopped them, and said this to them, "Dear factious spirits, it is true that God commanded this of Moses and spoke thus to the people; but we are not this people. Land, God spoke also to Adam; but that does not make me Adam, God commanded Abraham to put his son to death [Gen. 22:2]; but that does not make me Abraham and obligate me to put my son to death. God spoke also with David. It is all God's word. But let God's word be what it may, I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed. You are still a long way from being the people with whom God spoke." The false prophets say, "You are that people, God is speaking to you." You must prove that to me. With talk like that these factious spirits could have been refuted. But they wanted to be beaten, and so the rabble went to the devil.

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God

has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. God said to David, "Out of you shall come the king," etc. [II Sam, 7:13]. But this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you.

The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it does not pertain to me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say, "Dear people, this is the word of God," That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people. God has not given us the directive. The factious spirits came in and wanted to stir up something new, saying, "We must keep the Old Testament also..'" So they led the peasants into a sweat and ruined them in wife and child. These insane people imagined that it had been withheld from them, that no one had told them they are supposed to murder. It serves them right. They would not follow or listen to anybody. I have seen and experienced it myself, how mad, raving, and senseless they were.

Therefore tell this to Moses: Leave Moses and his people together; they have had their day and do not pertain to me. I listen to that word which applies to me. We have the gospel. Christ says, "Go and preach the gospel," not only to the Jews as Moses did, but to "all nations," to "all creatures" [Mark 16:15]. To me it is said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. Again, "Go and do to your neighbor as has been done to you" [cf. Matt. 7:12]. These words strike me too, for I am one of the "all creatures." If Christ had not added, "preach to all creatures," then I would not listen, would not be baptized, just as I now will not listen to Moses because he is given not to me but only to the Jews. However because Christ says: not to one people, nor in this or in that place in the world, but to "all creatures," therefore no one is exempt. Rather all are thereby included; no one should doubt that to him too the gospel is to be preached. And so I believe that word; it does pertain also to me. I too belong under the gospel, in the new covenant. Therefore I put my trust in that word, even if it should cost a hundred thousand lives.

This distinction should be noticed, grasped, and taken to heart by those preachers who would teach others; indeed by all Christians, for everything depends entirely upon it. If the peasants had understood it this way, they would have salvaged much and would not have been so pitifully misled and ruined. And where we understand it differently, there we make sects and factions, slaving among the rabble and into the raving and uncomprehending people without any distinction, saying, "God's word, God's word." But my dear fellow, the question is whether it was said to you. God indeed speaks also to angels, wood, fish, birds, animals, and all creatures, but this does not make it pertain to me. I should pay attention to that which applies

to me, that which is said to me, in which God admonishes, drives, and requires something of me.

Here is an illustration. Suppose a housefather had a wife, a daughter, a son, a maid, and a hired man. Now he speaks to the hired man and orders him to hitch up the horses and bring in a load of wood, or drive over to the field, or do some other job. And suppose he tells the maid to milk the cows, churn some butter, and so on. And suppose he tells his wife to take care of the kitchen and his daughter to do some spinning and make the beds. All this would be the words of one master, one housefather. Suppose now the maid decided she wanted to drive the horses and fetch the wood, the hired man sat down and began milking the cows, the daughter wanted to drive the wagon or plow the field, the wife took a notion to make the beds or spin and so forgot all about the kitchen; and then they all said, "The master has commanded this, these are the housefather's orders!" Then what? Then the housefather would grab a club and knock them all in a heap, and say, "Although it is my command, yet I have not commanded it of you; I gave each of you your instructions, you should have stuck to them."

It is like this with the word of God. Suppose I take up something that God ordered someone else to do, and then I declare, "But you said to do it." God would answer, "Let the devil thank you; I did not tell you to do it." One must distinguish well whether the word pertains to only one or to everybody.

(The whole sermon is found in *Luther's Works*, Vol: 35. CPH, pp. 161-174)

Sermon Idea: Moses and Elijah came to Jesus (That the Holy Spirit would equip the hearer to heed the Law and delight in the Freedom of God's gracious gift of Salvation.)

This sermon is drawn from the gist of Luther's sermon above. The Old Testament prophets and authors like Moses and Elijah are there to serve Christ, he does not serve them. We are inclined to tip that on its head. We love the rules, and we especially love to apply them to other folks. In Luther's day this often mean that folks read the laws of Moses and rather arbitrarily started applying them. The papists insisted that the OT priesthood was referring to the priestly office of Christians. The fanatics, as Luther called them, were laying all sorts of rules and regulations on the consciences of people, often with OT citations to go with them. And then there were others who in the name of the Gospel would have taken a Marcionite track and simply jettisoned the OT.

Luther would have none of it. Moses bore witness to Christ. He recorded the promise that a seed of Adam and Eve would crush Satan's head, that meant we needed to read the OT. For Luther the OT was the swaddling clothes in which the infant Jesus was wrapped. At the same time, any reading which obscured the essential liberty and free joy which Christ's death and resurrection secured for us was also rejected, even if it had NT citations to support it. (This is why Luther also rejected the prohibition against oaths which the fanatics drew from the Sermon on the Mount and which is still insisted upon by their heirs, the Mennonites and Amish.)

Today most of our hearers are not excessively burdened by rules imposed by others. That is not to say that this does not happen. The whole Prayer of Jabez phenomenon of a few years ago was an example of this: follow this rule and then God will bless you. Most of our hearers are rather functionally Marcionite. The OT is there, we confess it to be the truth, but we don't read it. It is a little like Canada in that regard. It exists, but we just don't go there very often. We should. The OT is a wonderful, beautiful witness to Christ. Canada is a beautiful place as well.

For Peter and his friends, the OT was their only Bible. Jesus can be said to be the most important professor of OT theology who ever existed. (One of my students caught me in that just the other day when I said that Luther may have been the most important OT professor ever. She said Jesus was. She was right.)

Today the Gospel reading proclaims that Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of the OT came to Jesus. They came because they bore witness to him. They came to see him. For us on the other side of this transfiguration, like Peter, James, and John, we need that witness, that testimony. The promises which Moses records and the kingdom of God which both men embodied, pushes Christ our way.

Moses' Commandments need to be obeyed, they are part of what Luther calls that natural law above. But more importantly, they perfectly describe our Lord Jesus. He kept them, perfectly. Elijah, centuries distant from Jesus, as we are centuries distant from our Lord, was a window into Christ as he raised the widow's son in Zarephath and railed against the idolatrous and murderous sin of Ahab. Moses leading the people of Israel through the Red Sea points us to our own baptismal font and his provision of Manna in the desert directs our attention to the very Bread of Life and this Supper which powers our pilgrimage.

Luther's distinction is critical here. The OT should always point us to Christ, not toward ourselves and some keeping of the Law in order to please God and earn his favor. If you live in a part of the world in which your people are confronted by Adventists or others who insist that it says so in the OT therefore one must do it, lead your people to be able to say no. Far more likely, however, we are confronted with folks who sneer at the OT as a homophobic, barbarous book completely out of step with modern sensibilities. Its sacrifices offend PETA, its depictions of Sodom and Gomorrah are not fit for polite company today, and the overt patriarchy of the whole thing means that women just should not read it. At least that is what some think and say. But every lamb slain, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, and every time sinners are smote by the hand of God are all pointing toward Christ.

We cannot lose this OT nor ignore it. The Jesus who stood on that hill those many years ago is incredible/unbelievable without it.

Here are my notes on this Gospel reading, lightly edited, from the three year series:

After six days, is this a deliberate allusion to the fact that God sat on Mt Sinai for six days, thundering and quaking the ground before Moses came up to him? Is this six days an allusion to creation? Does this make this a Sabbath or worship sort of experience? Does the fact of the six days suggest something else? Or is it simply a calendar factotum that Matthew remembered?

He ascends a high mountain. We don't know which one it is, but many have suggested Mt Hermon, which by Rocky Mountain standards is pretty wimpy, but it is dramatic by all accounts if you are standing there. These mountain top experiences are plentiful in the Bible, from Moses on Mt. Sinai to Mt. Nebo, Elijah on Carmel and Horeb, and more. Of course the temple is built on Mt. Zion. God has a track record of doing important things on mountains.

We read that Jesus was changed. Or is this how he really looks all the time? Is the transfiguration really an undoing of the change that came over him at Bethlehem's stable? Is this change something that happens when he comes down the hill or when he goes up? What is his normal appearance?

Moses and Elijah are there. I have always wondered how Peter and the rest of the crew recognized them. I don't suppose they wore name tags. Did Moses lug around a set of stone tablets, did Elijah dress a certain way? That's how Raphael identified them in the picture above. Or was this just a moment of inspiration and the Spirit told the disciples who these guys were? Matthew also tells us that Moses, Elijah and Jesus talk – obviously these are great figures from the OT, paragons of Law and Prophets, but what do they talk about? Why is that not important enough to hear? Luke simply says they spoke about Jesus' "exodus," but tells us nothing more. What did they say? The Bible will not tell us. We are left to wonder. Did they encourage Jesus? What holy discourse occupied them there?

The fact that the conversation is not recorded but only observed as a fact would lead us to believe that the real significance is not in what they said, but in their presence. They have come to this point because Jesus is there. God has plucked them from Elisha's side and the top of Mt Nebo centuries before and brought them to this moment when the three disciples see them talking to the incarnate Lord. What conclusions are we to draw from their presence? Here are a few I can think of:

- A. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament – all three of the synoptic Gospel writers seem to have this as a focus. Moses represents the Torah (Law) and Elijah the prophets. John, interestingly enough, does not tell this story.*
- B. *Within all three of the synoptics, this story falls at the midpoint of their accounts of the ministry of Jesus. In a sense this story forms a literary climax. The authors of all three synoptics think this story is pivotal. The attestation and presence of Elijah and Moses are important.*
- C. *The reaction of the Peter suggests that he wanted to stay there. The booths he intended to build would suggest that he was not frightened by their presence – the fear seems to be in reaction to the voice and the cloud.*

- D. *The presence of Moses and Elijah seems to have been important to share with the disciples, but it was a message which would have to wait until after the resurrection according to Jesus. But we do hear this after the resurrection; it had to wait for us to hear it. They were not to talk about it until then, but this is not then. Now it is something important and necessary to talk about. The presence of Moses and Elijah is important for us to hear as well as for Jesus to have experienced.*

What to make of all this? I am not entirely sure. This day can easily overwhelm the preacher. It is a tough day to get your head around. Perhaps the thinking needs to be simpler, almost child-like.

Is it really just so simple, like Christmas, God came and was born, don't make it harder than it has to be. Today, Jesus is conclusively demonstrated to be God's Son. The prophets of old report to him, they look to him. They have come to see him on this mountain, he has not climbed the mountain to see them. The great figures of the Old Testament think of Jesus as their God, their boss. He is the one who sent Moses and Elijah and the rest of the prophetic band. That means as we join him in the long Lenten journey we can be sure that when we come to that cross on which he will die it will actually mean something. The salvation worked out here is the same salvation Moses preached and Elijah too.

I am not sure that we want to think too much more about this. But what do you see here? Am I missing something else?

Three years ago we remembered that in Matthew's narrative Peter had just verses before this been held up as a prophet for identifying Jesus as the Messiah, but then called "Satan" for trying to get Jesus to choose a different path. Is the real point here that God gets Peter to listen to Jesus? Was Peter unable to see the Gospel resurrection, he was hung up on the death part and could not see the next part. God exhorts them to listen to Him, and now he can get to the resurrection part.

Jesus takes us up a hill. Hebrews says that we come to a holy mountain. What hill do we come to here? Is it worship? Is it the preacher who comes down to bring the message to the people? Do we come up the hill when we encounter God in his word? (This might resonate well with the Peter text and its emphasis on the word of God.)

Law

1. God's knowledge is often too terrible for us to bear. Does he really know everything about us, even the things we are most ashamed of? Scripture's witness is clear. Yes, he does.
2. God's presence is an occasion for fear for the sinners. The disciples fall upon their faces terrified at the voice. The Holy God does not tolerate sin. He is not a grandfatherly sort who smiles and winks at us. The Fear of the Lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom. He is not safe to be around.

3. God's power is awesome. Time means nothing to him. Saints of old can be plucked up in whirlwind and dropped on a mountain top 800 years later. That is a pretty awesome deed. God is not merely strong, he is almighty.
4. You and I are 2000 years after these events. Our temptation is to make too much or too little of ourselves. On one hand our hubris might lead us to believe that every prophecy of the end times refers to ourselves (ala dispensationalism) but equally problematic is to believe that we are insignificant in the larger scheme of things. Does God really see us? Does he even notice us? If so, why do we find him so hard to see sometimes? Why have the miracles and visions and deeds seemingly dried up?

Gospel

1. God has had this whole salvation piece planned out for a very long time. Moses and Elijah both lived centuries prior to Jesus conversation with them. He is not reacting, but pro-acting.
2. God is keenly aware of the presence of the disciples. This whole tableau seems to have been constructed for their benefit and for our benefit who read their words recorded here. God has revealed his Son for our eyes to see through them.
3. God established the credentials of Jesus to go to the cross and bear our sins. This Jesus of Nazareth really is someone special. His death upon a cross will make all the difference in the world for my most troubling problems.
4. Jesus knows that we are terrified of the Holy God. "Rise and have no fear" he says to the disciples. He does not stay on the mountain but resumes his human race and runs it to the gory, crucified end so that men like Peter, James and John and us need not only fear but also may love God.
5. He has saved this message for us. He loves our faith in it. Peter says that the trust we have in the Old Testament witness is better than his own experience on the mountain top, more sure than his eyewitness account. Perhaps that is modesty on his part, but it is also something that is eminently accessible to all of us. God's Word bears witness to Christ.
6. The fathers of Moses day were sprinkled with blood and they could stand in the presence of God. The Lenten fast which is soon upon us will remind us of our failures and our sins, but it does so that the blood of Christ may be more fully applied to our lives. We walk with Christ to Jerusalem and his death in our place.

Sermon Themes (These are from past iterations of these readings in the three year cycle on the festival of the Transfiguration.)

1. Ready for the Journey – (The Gospel lesson – That God would strengthen the faith of the hearer for the journey of Lent so that he/she may with true Easter joy celebrate the resurrection of his/her Savior.) *Note: In the three year cycle the festival of Transfiguration falls immediately before Lent begins. In the one year cycle it falls immediately before the “gisma” Sundays which are preparing us for Lent, so this still works, but it may take a little explaining by the preacher.*

As we look ahead to Lent, God gives us a glimpse of the end of the story. Easter joy awaits us, resurrection and glory. But we must also struggle through the valley. Peter wanted to stay, but glory without cross is impossible. Jesus will set it aside for a little while longer, to live, and fight, and die with us and for us that we might rise with him.

This sermon will want to remind the pilgrim of the end of the journey. It is not in a cross, with Golgatha’s bile and vinegar, but in a glorious resurrection. He who lays aside this glory, picks it up again, just as surely as he lays it aside when he walks down that hill.

The believer is challenged to remember and believe that the Jesus whom he/she follows is God. And to ponder why that is important. God will go that cross for you and me. He is the only one who could pay that price. He is the only one whose death will mean anything to this sinner two thousand years later. Indeed, however long this old globe keeps spinning, the death of this Jesus will be significant, because of who he was, is, and ever will be.

The journey we are about to embark on is long. It involves a serious and honest look at ourselves, especially our less than savory selves. We can skip that part and keep singing only happy and clappy songs, but unfortunately if we do, we skip the joy as well, and our Sundays all become the same, monotonously the same. Today, God gives us hope. We enter the surgery of Lent and Easter, but the one whom we find there is the one who has the answer to what ails us.

2. Our Mountain Top Experience - (OT and Epistle lesson – That the hearer would perceive that we too have a mountain top experience, dining with God, touching, seeing, and experiencing the Lord which is in no way inferior and may be superior to that of Peter and the Elders of Israel.)

The malady here is our very human nature which often determines our expectations. We are looking for the cloud and big voice. We have a Peter problem. Peter seemed to think that self-respecting messiahs don’t go and get themselves killed. We think that if God is here, he surely would show up in some miracle, not in a tasteless wafer, mass produced in some factory in New Jersey, that a preacher puts into my hand, a Bible study which can be talking about something I am not interested in, or a worship service which does not quite hit my taste. Elijah experienced God in the still small voice, not the wind, earthquake and fire. Elijah and Moses came to the mountaintop to experience in the

incarnate Christ, a carpenter and itinerant preacher from Nazareth who had thick callouses on his feet from all his wandering.

In our worship experiences, between that Invocation of God's name, and the Benediction by which we put the name of God on the people, there is a holy hour, a moment when we simply are in the presence of God. One of the great things about being a Lutheran is that we believe God is here whether we believe it or emotionally grasp it. God does not wait for me to see him before he shows up. That wafer which I disdain is still working his presence and blessing even on my hard heart. This is not about our doing, but God's doing. The world and too often we ourselves look at this hour and find not the holiness which is actually there, but something to fight about, something to critique, and an hour when our minds can wander to the "really important things" that are waiting for us when we return. The Gospel in this sermon will not be that we get it right or understand this properly, but that Jesus has come despite our misunderstanding and failures of faith. He has come because we need him to be right and he gets it right. Our expectation of a mountain top experience may in fact be getting in the way of the real one which is right before us.

Earlier in the Epiphany season we heard the Baptizer exhort us as well, "Behold the Son of God, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the World, the healer of humanity, the teacher of our souls." Simeon held this helpless infant in his arms and proclaimed that God had revealed universal salvation to his aged eyes. Jesus, you see, really is God and we are enfolded in the arms of the one who holds the very power of the universe in his hands. Rise and fear not he says to us today. With perforated hands he blesses us today, glorious and beautiful to behold. Look no further, this is the mountain top experience we need!

But what is our mountain top experience? Today's texts would point us to two places where we experience the very presence of God, not on a literal mountain but the same God come to the valley to be with us. The first of these is in the Old Testament lesson. The Elders of Israel are invited to a feast. So are you, the very feast of this altar. When we extend our hand and the servant says, "Take and eat, the body of Christ" we partake of a feast better than those elders of yore. I don't know what they ate, but we eat the very flesh of God. He comes inside us, changes us, and forgives us. That is a mountain top experience the preacher can develop. We want to give this moment of communion a sense of holy awe. What does that holy awe look like when we come to the sacrament? Is it a bow before the altar? Is it the vestments? Do we sing? The folks at Imago Dei, the local non-denom church who are really into this, use a lot of candles to evoke this sense. Do we need to kneel at that altar or somehow express this with body and mind and voice. This same sense of awe also can apply to the next. The paraments will be white today because Jesus is clothed in white. The colors of the altar and lectern and stole are reflective of what Jesus wears. (Revelation 4 speaks of God's throne with an emerald

rainbow around it – hence the green of Epiphany and Pentecost seasons. Jesus wears a purple robe, hence lent’s purple, etc.)

All of us have had the experience of having parishioners come to the rail, sometimes with radiant smiles. Other times they have come with tears streaming down their faces and they eagerly eat and drink. Both of them are holy awe. Do we hang onto tradition for this reason? Does the tradition allow for this whole range of emotion?

The second is in the Epistle lesson. Peter, who stood on the mountain top of Transfiguration, who saw the cloud, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus in shining clothes says that we have a more sure witness in the words of our Bible. Do we need to treat that Biblical book with reverence? Do we need to act as if this too is a holy event? The Muslim is offended by the way we treat the text of our own scriptures. Do we need to listen to this?

The malady in this sermon will be the familiarity which we bring to these events. They are not “new” but ever so familiar, but don’t make that a problem, they are beautifully familiar. But do warn them of the familiarity which breeds contempt. Focus instead on the familiarity of a home, or a spouse, or an old friend whose familiarity is not a matter for despising them, but for loving them the more. Jesus does not want his love, his touch, his nourishment to be rare but common. If you are able to do so, tell the story of ministering to someone who is dying by singing the familiar words of the liturgy, reciting the 23rd psalm, Lord’s Prayer, or something like that. Familiarity can be a very good thing.

The Gospel will be found in the very mundane reality of this, but not in the simple mundane-ness, but in the fact that in these mundane things we are experience what was only available to the few in those pre-Pentecost days. Now, we all are part of this. God has invited all of us up the hill. God has written the law upon all our hearts, no one needs to descend the mountain to tell us, we are there, we are eating of this feast, we are hearing these words. Praise God, he thought this was important enough