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Festival of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Series A 2017

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Feast of the Transfiguration, Feb, 26

Do you like the picture? It is by Raphael and is found in the Vatican. This festival has inspired a great deal of art, some of 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.

The Feast of Transfiguration closes out the season of Epiphany for us. We end this season as we began, with a voice from heaven declaring that Jesus is God's Son, beloved and to be listened to. Do you remember all the way back to the Baptism of our Lord and that voice from heaven?

Perhaps that is as far as one should really go with this text, but the complexity of the readings and the obvious importance that the Gospel writers place upon it has always tempted me to say more. I am not entirely certain that I have ever really grasped this day, however. It is one of those days which seem to elude the preacher. Sometimes I get something really right, but other times I have felt much more like babbling Peter.

We will wrestle a little with this on Tuesday, I am sure. But of course there is more to this day. The feast serves a transition point. It has one foot in Epiphany but the other is at least taking a step toward Lent. Jesus will come down from this mountain, set his face for Jerusalem, and in the next chapters announce his intention to be handed over, crucified and resurrected. This is not only the culmination of Epiphany, it is the launching point for our Lenten Fast and our whole Paschal season. The Jesus who carries that cross up the mount of Calvary had ascended this mountain to converse with Moses and Elijah. Because he was the One to whom they reported as prophets, his death has meaning and significance even today, even these many years later.

Three years ago we 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.

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 24:8-18 *I have extended the reading to include some important context for this reading.*

³ *Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."* ⁴ *And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.* ⁵ *And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD.* ⁶ *And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar.* ⁷ *Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."* ⁸ *And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

⁹ *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,* ¹⁰ *and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.* ¹¹ *And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.*

¹² *The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."* ¹³ *So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.* ¹⁴ *And he said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them."*

¹⁵ *Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.* ¹⁶ *The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud.* ¹⁷ *Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.* ¹⁸ *Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

Let's just face this fact about this reading. It is bizarre. First of all, it seems to contradict a basic tenet of the Biblical narrative that to see God is to die. Isaiah, even in a vision, believes he will die for beholding God (Isaiah 6). Moses asks to see God a few chapters later in Exodus 33 but is only given to see his "back side." Here Moses, Joshua and scores of others sit down to dinner with God on a pavement of blue sapphire and apparently the food was even pretty good.

But even if the apparently contradiction is dispensed with here, what does one actually make of this text? I think it is here to tell us something of the reason Jesus is talking to Moses on the mountain. But what does this tell us about Moses?

I believe the point of contact here is the ascent up the mountain to commune with God. But for our folks I think the critical element is that Moses and the elders of Israel eat there. Is the possible connection that we also commune with God on this mountain top, along with Peter,

James, and John when we kneel and partake of a meal which transcends time and place? They beheld God, they ate and they drank, and they did not die. So do we are given to eat and drink. We ask this very question in the introductory paragraph. Is this a text about our worship as much as it is a text about Moses?

The other part of this that intrigues me is the application of the blood at the beginning which makes possible the holy assembly and the meal with God. The earlier context which I have provided is interesting. The covenant is based on “all these words” not only the Words God spoke but apparently also the words which the Israelites spoke and which we echo in our rite of Confirmation.

I also wonder if our folks feel like anything has changed after we speak the words absolution over them. Do we actually treat them differently? Do they start acting differently? Is there a difference within the community after those words are spoken? Yet, the truth be told, the absolution we speak is a verbal application of the blood of Jesus to their lives. I often insert the “sharing of the peace” after the absolution to make that point. Now we see the folks in the pew with us very differently. God has sprinkled us all with the blood of Jesus. Almost makes you want to go out and get one of those holy water sprinklers the papists use.

Psalm 2:6-12

*Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?*

²*The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,*

³*“Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”*

⁴*He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.*

⁵*Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,*

⁶*“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”*

⁷*I will tell of the decree:*

*The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.*

⁸*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.*

⁹*You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”*

¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

¹² Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Some students of the psalms suggest that the first and second psalms are actually the introduction to the whole collection. The first psalm is about the way of the righteous compared and contrasted with the way of the wicked. This second psalm puts this right into the messy world of politics, governance, and every day sorts of stuff. God is interested in that too.

The human attempt to write God out of that picture is risible, an object of Divine mirth. Our culture thinks that it has mastered him, evicted God from the lives of people, but God laughs at this puny rebellion. His power breaks our imagined power and greatness like pottery hitting the tile floor.

The exhortation is to wise up. There is real power afoot.

II Peter 1:16-21

¹⁶ For 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. ¹⁷ For 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,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And 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, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

(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 a 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.

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 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:

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.)

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