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Festival of the Transfiguration Series C 2019

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Festival of the Transfiguration – March 3

I find the Transfiguration a rather difficult festival to preach. Jesus shows up in this amazing brilliance and the disciples are really awestruck. He talks to two Old Testament guys which is interesting but this whole account is about who Jesus is and says very little about what he does for me, at least in the text. I have always found it tough to preach it. I guess I am too existential for this. I want to know what this means for me and seeing Jesus glow in the dark doesn't seem to offer me a lot of potential.

Here are a few options I have preached in the past. Some of them worked better than others.

1. I have preached the season – Transfiguration caps off the Epiphany season, today the Father repeats the message he spoke at the Baptism of our Lord which kicked it off in early January. This sermon really recapitulates the whole Epiphany message. Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God.
2. I have preached the nature of Jesus – but tied it to the cross. Transfiguration itself is not the story. The real story is that this Jesus to whom ancient prophets came and whom the Father declared to be His Son, this very Jesus went to the cross. Because he is this Jesus, his death on that cross means something today, two thousand years later.
3. I have preached the connection to the Old Testament – Jesus is the fulfillment of both the Law and Prophets, Moses and Elijah, the two great exemplars of OT theology and revelation. This is a sermon which addresses the latent Marcionism which inhabits a great deal of North American Christianity.
4. I have preached this as a preparation for Lent - the mountaintop experience from which we descend with Jesus to the bitter plains of Lent and Passion to the mountain of Golgotha, Olives, and Resurrection. (Works a little better with Luke since he has them talking about his “exodus” the road out which will go through a cross and a grave.)
5. I have preached this as a picture of how Jesus is right now – Transfiguration as a glimpse at the glorified Christ, the Jesus who rose from the grave and who lives and reigns at this moment. This is the Jesus to whom we are talking when we pray.
6. I have also preached this Lucan version for its strange inclusion of the fact that this happened on the eighth day. The eighth day of the week belongs to the new creation. This is an odd idea which surfaced in the early church but which works. There are seven days to creation, hence the week we use to mark time. The Sunday which starts the next week is really counted twice, as the first day of the new week and as the “eighth day” of the past week – outside the creation, a new creation, not defined by the fall and sin but by God's gracious love and regeneration. (This might be better bible study material where you can get questions.)

7. I have preached this as a baptismal text, as God describes Jesus as his Son and speaks the same words to us in our baptism. (A stretch, but I remember that we had a baptism on that day. This also has the benefit of having a tie in with the prayer of the day.)
8. I have preached this as an anticipation of Easter. Why these two guys? Is this a picture of our resurrection too? These two guys did not die – are they here for a witness and testimony to our resurrection and life? If you remember Elijah did not die but was taken to heaven. Moses “died” but it says no one could find his tomb. Is that an oblique reference to another assumption like Elijah’s and possibly Enoch’s in chapter 5 of Genesis? Look under the OT reading for a fuller description of this.
9. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem – Jesus leaves the glory of this sort for the glory of the cross. Here we get the steely resolve of Jesus to see this mission through. In this sort of an approach, the transfiguration would be a last moment of heavenly bliss for Jesus before undertakes his bitter suffering and death. Is it almost a temptation for him to stay on the mountain? Is Peter really tempting him? Jesus has already called him “Satan” for a similar temptation.
10. I am sure that I have preached this other ways and by the blessing of God have been given to forget them, most likely because they were not very good.

What will we do with this? What do our people need to hear from us this Transfiguration Sunday? We have this strange and surreal event portrayed for us. It was obviously important to the Gospel writers as it appears in all three of the synoptics, and usually at the favored spot in the middle of the book. It seems they all thought it was important, but why is it important to us? Do we just join Peter and say “wow!”? That is hard to preach. Do we walk away from this experience somehow changed and the better for it? Does this tell me something about what Jesus does for me or something about what I am like now that he has done it? I have always struggled with this one. I say that only as a word of encouragement if you are struggling with this. It is preachable, but if you are having to work at it. You are not alone.

Collect of the Day

O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the 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.

*“In the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son you confirmed the mysteries of the faith...”
What mysteries? A mystery, remember, is not something that defies any understanding, in the biblical parlance a mystery is something that you can never fully understand, but a thousand years of contemplating it will be very fruitful indeed. A mystery has no bottom. Plumb its depths*

and you will find it always is still deeper. We tend to hear the word mystery and think that it means we shut the brain off and just believe it, but the truth is the exact opposite. A mystery means we have a thing to think about for a very, very long time. What is more a mystery means that thinking hard, learning, meditating, pondering, can be very fruitful.

Thus we ask the question again, “What mysteries did this visit from Moses and Elijah confirm?” They are the exemplars of Old Testament Law and Prophets. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that work, every lamb proscribed in the Torah is an arrow pointing to Jesus. The Word which came to every prophet was the pre-incarnate Word which was with God and was God. These are the mysteries of incarnation, salvation, prophecy, and sacrament. When Elijah spoke of hope, when Moses wrote of a seed of Adam and Eve, they were talking about Jesus. In the Tuesday evening discussions we considered this and came up with three important mysteries:

Mystery #1 – the OT Law and Prophets points to Jesus. This is the mystery that Jesus really is the fulfillment of all the OT stories. Every lamb is really about him, every king is about him, every prophet is about him. The people of the OT are always also a picture of the people he redeems from sin, death, and devil. This is really the mystery of the OT as a witness to Christ.

Mystery #2 – Jesus was there with Moses and Elijah in the OT – He was the Word of the Lord which came to these Old Testament prophets: the mystery of the pre-incarnate Christ.

Mystery #3 – Salvation itself: God had said to Moses he would never enter the land, and yet here he is in the Promised Land, standing on the Mount of Transfiguration. Is this his only moment of being in the land? Moses was prohibited from the Promised Land because he struck the rock against God’s command. He sinned. His only access to the Promised Land is this conversation with Jesus. We are not in the Promised Land either, and we have been forbidden by Sin. But we will get there through Christ. That has legs to preach.

“In the voice which came from the bright cloud, God foreshadowed our adoption” This seems a little easier. This is the word of God in our own baptism, when we are declared to be the children of God. But the preacher might want to talk adoption here.

We pray that God would mercifully make us co-heirs of God’s kingdom. This is actually the request of the prayer, the first two sentences of this unusually long collect are actually the ascription of this prayer. Now we are asking for something, but what a thing to ask. We want to be co-heirs with the king in his glory. Nothing quite like shooting for the top! I might be satisfied with being a peasant in heaven. Do they have janitors in heaven? Street sweepers? That would be fine for me. Do the door knobs need polishing?

Then we want him to bring us to the fullness of our inheritance. The use of fullness here suggests that there could be a partial inheritance. I am not sure what that means, but it seems to be talking about the Now and the Not Yet. We are heirs, we experience inclusion in the kingdom of God right now in sacrament, absolution, forgiveness and the love of God, but we also yearn for

the day in which we will behold him as he is; when that inheritance will be ours for all to see. We will be able to see him that day because we will be like him. (I John)

Both of these things involve God's merciful action. He shows mercy to us – this is not deserved, in fact something else is deserved – God's eternal wrath. Mercy can only be shown the guilty, not the innocent.

Readings

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. ⁴ And the LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there." ⁵ So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, ⁶ and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. ⁷ Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated. ⁸ And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

⁹ And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, ¹¹ none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, ¹² and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Hermeneutical Tangent: *The reader may want just to skip over this part of the commentary. I am about to go on a hermeneutical tangent of sorts and you are welcome not to bother with it. If you want to avoid this, go to the bold text below that says: "Resume Commentary"*

The two texts we have in Luke and Deuteronomy actually present us with a conundrum, at least it would have been a wrinkle to God's people of old who read their Bibles very carefully. They would have delighted in this and spent a great deal of time wrestling with it. The issue revolves around Moses' death. It says in verse that Moses died. But in Luke and the other Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, Moses is very much alive.

There are several ways to answer this question, and the answer that most of us leap to in post-enlightenment western Christianity may in fact be somewhat heretical. This question is very much complicated by the presence of Elijah, whom the text is quite clear did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind and a chariot of fire in II Kings 2.

I don't think most of us even question this. We just assume that Moses is up in heaven with the whole raft of other Christians who have already died, floating on a cloud, playing his harp, and singing interminable praise songs. But in fact this is where the heresy comes in. The Bible never talks about dead people that way. It just says that they are dead, asleep in Christ, awaiting the day of resurrection. I think the point is that Moses is standing there with Jesus because he is not dead. He is not some zombie Moses. Elijah is the proof of this. Elijah was taken from some valley east of the Jordan river about 800 years before this and brought by God to this moment, very much still alive, perhaps with his hair still mussed up from that whirlwind. It won't do to suggest that Moses died and this is some spiritual, but dead Moses who is here.

Then why does it say that he died in Deuteronomy? We have several options before us, perhaps the Deut. text is using a figure of speech, perhaps it reports what people thought, perhaps something else. Augustine would have said that this sort of a wrinkle was in the text to keep us from getting bored. He saw boredom as another form of death and very detrimental to the faith. God cared so much about our minds that he made sure there were some interesting puzzles in the Bible which would occupy us

My hermeneutical point is perhaps a little more pointed than I have made it out to be thus far. So let me be blunt. I think we often say we are a Bible based church, but we are not. We read it altogether too quickly and do not ponder these things nearly deeply enough. We simply assume the post-enlightenment fights and answers which we have been given and the Bible is not really an active agent in our thinking and lives which challenges us to think. The result is a faith which is far more interested in having the answers we think are right than it is interested in listening to God.

Resume Commentary *This text is here because we see Moses reappearing on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. The parallel figure, Elijah, ascended into heaven in the whirlwind of II Kings 2. Of course it says "Moses died" here, but many a commentator and theologian has wondered if the mysterious reality that God hid his tomb and no one has ever found it, is not just another way of saying that he ascended in the same manner of Elijah.*

The point would entirely be seen in the story of the transfiguration. Jesus is talking to these guys simply because they are not dead, they never died, they were taken to heaven for this very moment, that they might talk with Jesus this day. The reason David did not come is that he is dead; as Peter said in Acts, the Jews of his days could see his very tomb.

There are a couple of other things here worth mentioning. This vision from Nebo is extensive. In truth, one could not see this far from this mountain, but in the Spirit of God he did survey that land.

Moses was 120 years old. Joshua, nearly Moses' equal will only live to be 110. Moses' vigor, his eyesight, his strength, were undiminished by the years. Remarkably well preserved we would say. In Tolkien's world, we would start looking for a magic ring or something like that.

Moses was the pre-eminent prophet, he spoke with God face to face, not through some vision or intermediary. He spoke directly to God. No other prophet did that, apparently. Moses was the best of the prophetic law givers. But he comes this day to serve Jesus, he comes a servant to Jesus mission, not Jesus to him, but he to Jesus. The point is clear. This greatest of the prophets, this writer of the Torah, this man who spoke to God face to face, in a close relationship with YHWH, this one, does indeed bend the knee before another, who is greater. As the writer to the Hebrews said, in the past God spoke through the prophets, but now he speaks through his Son. It is still God speaking, same God, but now it is different. This Jesus does not speak for God, he speaks as God.

As we noted above, Moses is on this mountain looking over the Jordan River into the land of promise because his sin keeps him out. Is his presence in the scene at the Mount of Transfiguration God going back on His Word? We won't want to say that, but perhaps it might force us into another way to think about the Word of God – Jesus. God's word of judgment is only undone by his Word of Grace – that is Jesus. Moses, even Moses only makes it to the Promised Land because of Jesus.

Psalm 99

The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

²The LORD is great in Zion;

he is exalted over all the peoples.

³Let them praise your great and awesome name!

Holy is he!

⁴The King in his might loves justice.

You have established equity;

you have executed justice

and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵Exalt the LORD our God;

worship at his footstool!

Holy is he!

⁶Moses and Aaron were among his priests,

Samuel also was among those who called upon his name.

They called to the LORD, and he answered them.

⁷In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them;

they kept his testimonies

and the statute that he gave them.

⁸O LORD our God, you answered them;

you were a forgiving God to them,

but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

⁹ Exalt the LORD our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy!

The last verse of this psalm completely changes when you read it on Transfiguration Sunday, doesn't it? Moses and Aaron are his priests, Samuel among those who worship. But so are Peter and James and John. For that matter so are we.

We too are standing on a holy mountain, a Zion which is better than Sinai (Hebrews 12:18-24). This Psalm might make a great sermon to preach "Gottesdienst" to the folks.

Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ² who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

Hebrews has two main themes, the first of these is that Jesus is greater than the angels, the second is that Jesus is greater than Moses. This chapter three passage kicks off that second theme.

The writer to the Hebrews, and we really don't know his name, makes use of a writing/argument technique which is odd to us. It was quite common in the first century, especially favored by Jewish writers. It is called "from the lesser to the greater" or in Latin "a minore, ad maiorem" It worked like this. Two things were laid side by side and the similarities noticed. In this case both Jesus and Moses are in charge of the house. But then a difference of degree/importance/etc., is noted. In this case, Moses is a servant and Jesus is the Son. What is noted then to be true in Moses case is even more true in Jesus case, goes the argument. In this sort of an argument it is critical to notice what is the same, what is different, and what is being compared.

In this example this analysis helps us see that the authority of Jesus is clearly greater than that of Moses. The Son can change the directive of a servant, but the servant cannot change the directive of the Son. Moses service was derivative, his testimony pointed ahead to things which would be said later. Jesus, on the other hand, was the thing to which Moses pointed, the one he served.

This text is really quite important to this day because it simply and flatly asserts who is who in this tableau recorded in the Gospel. Moses has come to see Jesus, not to be seen by Jesus. Jesus is the greater.

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” ³⁶ And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

Here we see the divine nature of Jesus revealed for our eyes to see. Yes, only Peter, James, and John are the only ones there, but they did not stay silent. The story is ours now. We see through their eyes. He is revealed for us to see.

This divine Jesus will head down the hill to climb another hill in Jerusalem with a cross on his back, but we are given to remember that this divine Jesus, this friend of Moses and Elijah, this dazzling God-Man is the one who carries that miserable piece of wood for us. His divinity really is what makes that death meaningful. Another Jewish peasant killed by the Romans is hardly noteworthy. The Son of God dying, that has cosmic significance.

Christian Schwartz has done a great deal of study of growing and thriving congregations. He notices that the places which are thriving and growing have passionate spirituality and inspiring worship. He said that the adjectives there are the most important. Everyone has spirituality and everyone has worship, but you need to be passionate in your spirituality and inspiring in your worship. I would guess Peter, James, and John were passionate and inspired by this event. Is this a Sunday to inspire? Is this a Sunday to be passionate? This text asks us to passionately believe that Jesus is God, we are not talking metaphor here, and we are not talking about some vague spirituality. Jesus cannot be just a moralizing teacher. He is God! His is fulfilling his promise (Mt. 28:16-20) and he is here right now. Can we really yawn in church?

Passion and inspiration suggest that we really believe what this passage is asserting. That passionately held belief which is demonstrable in life as we pray, love, serve, etc., and the inspiration we get from listening to Him talk to us, is what makes us attractive. This Jesus shows up in our worship today. This Jesus is just as much here as he was there dazzling the eyes of Peter, James, and John. Just like Moses and Elijah showed up that night, Jesus has shown up here. Is this a day to talk about the miracle of worship – God is here! This dazzling, pure, holy, eternal God is here!

Another way to approach this text is to lay in parallel to the Baptism text from Jan. 10. There God also declared Jesus to be his beloved Son with whom he was pleased. But not we have an addition: "Listen to him." Was God just stating the obvious because the Disciples, including us, are struggling with listening to Jesus? Or are we directed this way because Jesus is about to speak something terribly important?

Peter wants to make a shelter for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, but Jesus, in John 14, will say that he goes to heaven to prepare a place for us. Peter wants heaven on earth, but better than what Peter has in mind, Jesus has in mind something even bigger. God will not be contained by this earthly tent, and yet deigns to dwell in us. As the writer the Hebrews says we are his temple. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, Christ lives in us. This is a very Now/Not Yet sort of day. Jesus stands on the threshold of heaven, transcending both dimensions. We get a glimpse into the Not Yet, and are admonished not to hang onto the newness of that, God has something even better in mind. The tents of which Peter speaks without knowing what he says, would be a poor substitute for what God really has in mind for us.

Another approach to the text could ask this question: The eighth day from what? If you back up in the Gospel of Luke it is not entirely clear what is the starting point here, but many a theologian and reader of this text has been intrigued by this. The reason is that the eighth day has a very long history in Christian circles, perhaps even so long as to overlap with the writing of Luke. From the earliest days we hear that Sunday is the eighth day of the week, it is the new creation. The idea here is rather odd. Every week has seven days, we know that, but after the seventh day of the week we are introduced to something new, the new creation, on the next day. We gather on that new day, a sign of the new creation. It is as if every Sunday really lives in two different weeks and two different worlds. It is the first day of this week of the old order, the old creation, but in an eschatological sense, it is the eighth day, the new creation day, of the last week, the next world as well. Think about that, if it doesn't give you a headache, the next time you partake of the sacrament.

If you mix that with the theology of renewal through forgiveness/absolution/sacrament for the sins of the past week in which we just lived, this could be really fun. Of course, one could preach a whole sermon on this single verse and expand into the Transfiguration, the vision of Jesus in his glory is a vision we are given every Sunday, when in the now and the not yet, we live in the new creation, the kingdom of God. Yes, it is still the first day of the next week of the old creation too. It clings to us. But it is also true of us that we live in the new kingdom. Sunday for us connects us to both worlds.

Jesus goes on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, his inner circle of disciples, and prays. This too has some marvelous potential for the preacher. This is an event which transpires in the context of prayer. The Christian who prays joins with this Jesus and is in fact speaking to this Jesus. Moses and Elijah pray to this Jesus and converse with him.

Jesus clothing and face become dazzlingly white. What can this mean but that he is holy? This preternatural whiteness is associated with God. The veil is pulled partially aside and this text

gives us to see Jesus as he really is, not humbled for our sake and for our sinful eyes to tolerate. Now, through the eyes of Peter, James, and John, we see him in at least some of his glory. As I write this I am reading a text for one of the classes that I teach by Gene Wolff, entitled "The Urth of the New Sun." It is pretty hard core science fiction, but the main character is really a Christ figure, who brings a new sun to renew the old sun which humanity had somehow ruined. Gene is a Roman Catholic and this is filled with marvelous eschatological imagery and Transfiguration imagery. It is not the sort of book you will read before Sunday, but if you like this sort of stuff you might enjoy him. He is a tough read though, I must warn you.

He speaks with Elijah and Moses, the paragons of the Old Testament Law and Prophets, the greatest representatives of the covenants which God made leading up to the days of Jesus. Their lives, their words, their ministry all pointed toward this Jesus. Luke is very concerned throughout his book to show that this new Christian movement is rooted in its Jewish past, both for the sake of the truth, but also to demonstrate to Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4) that this is no novel or new thing we are doing. This story fits right into that structure.

They speak of his "departure" which in Greek is literally his "exodus." I find that term most suggestive. The exodus was when God liberated the Israelites from bondage and slavery. They passed through the waters of the Red Sea and he fed them in their pilgrimage through the wilderness until they reached the Promised Land. Luke wants us to see that they are talking about us too, not just Jesus' impending death and resurrection and ascension, although that is also critically important to this story. These events, however, are the same God at work who led the fathers through the desert. He is also leading us "out." When the Disciples gathered with Jesus on that night in which he was betrayed they were celebrating the Passover, the Jewish commemoration/festival of the Exodus event. Jesus gives them to radically re-imagine the Passover. He is the Passover lamb! The Exodus was really about him. He is not remembering the Exodus, the Exodus is "remembering" him or anticipating him.

The disciples are heavy with sleep. Paul spoke of looking through a darkened glass a week ago. We don't really get it just how stultified our senses are by sin. We marvel at the precision of our electron microscopes and telescopes and all that we can see. But in a very real sense we are as blind as the Pharisees in the story of Jesus and the blind man in John 9. Here their minds are heavy, their eyelids droop. They are coming out of a state that can only be described as stupor. But when they wake up they see the glory of God, revealed in Jesus. The stupor clings to them. Peter is overwhelmed by what he sees and starts babbling. Luke tells us that he did not know what he was saying. As Moses and Elijah are leaving he wants to hang onto this magical moment, make it last.

God intervenes, the Shekinah cloud of the Old Testament Exodus story and the dedication of the temple reappears. Interestingly enough, this is not the first time that it has appeared. The same glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds that Christmas night in Luke's telling of the story. He repeats the words spoken at the baptism: This is the Son, chosen. But this time there is an

additional mandate attached: Listen to him! Like that would be a problem for Peter, James, and John after seeing this!

The moment suddenly breaks. The cloud, Elijah and Elisha are seen no more. Jesus is not glowing like the product of some nuclear reaction. He is just plain old Jesus, the carpenter's son and the itinerant preacher they have been following. They have already gotten glimpses of this in the miracles and the words of Jesus, but now there is no mistake. They cannot see him the same way again. He has laid aside the glory, the power, the majesty. He walks not a road that goes straight up to heaven from here, but it takes a serious descending detour through a cross, a grave, and hell. He will take up this glory, but he won't do it without us, without going all the way to humanity's bitter end.

Law

1. Like Peter, I am heavy with sleep and prone to babbling. We come to a mystery today and feel terribly inadequate. I can hardly understand the mundane workings of my car, let alone the mysteries of God.
2. Like Peter, I am capable of completely missing the point and if left to my devices would divert the kingdom of God from its appointed course. I would build a tent when God has a much better house in mind for me.
3. Even Moses cannot remain. Elijah's time came and he was taken up. Humanity's best are not enough. Moses for all his faithfulness over God's house was but a servant. What hope do I have?
4. My world seems mighty dark these days. Economic, health, relationship, politics, earthquakes and more seem to conspire against us. Is there anything really good happening? It all seems to be tainted, broken, and corrupt.
5. I strive to rise above this, I really do. But I keep being pulled back to sordid earthly life by the irresistible gravity of my own human nature. Douglas Adams once said that the secret to flying is simply to throw yourself at the ground...and miss. I just find myself bruised and battered, earthbound.

Gospel

1. Jesus ascends this mountain to pray. The human that he is acts with clarity and acuity which I lack. Mysteries are no less effective for my lack of understanding them. Indeed, my car is just such a thing, I really don't get how it works, but when I turn the key and perform some basic maintenance, it gets where I want to go. God has the mysteries down, I don't have to, I can rest in his great and knowledgeable hands.
2. God sometimes says no to us. Jesus hears Peter's prayer, but the cloud departs, and Jesus sets his face for his own mission, not Peter's misguided attempt to hang onto this

moment. He does not grow angry or weary, but greets his friends, calms their fears, and sets off down the hill.

3. Peter's failures, Moses' inadequacy, Elijah's crabbiness, they are all real, and part of the reason that Jesus is on this hill. He has come down to earth because we have failed. My own inadequacies are not occasion to dwell on my failures but on his great mercy and light.
4. This the eighth day, it sits in two worlds, part of the old creation and part of the new. Yes, the stubborn old broken world clings tightly too it and it could blind me to more, but awoken from a stupor I might just see God at work today, in kindness which has no reason, in the labor of a man rebuilding a house for a complete stranger at the local habitat for humanity project. The light shines in this place too, do you see it?
5. My modus operandi may not be the right one, but Jesus' is. He has not asked us to rise above this humanity, but he has descended to the grave to find us and all humanity. The entrance requirement for heaven is to be dead. The fact of the matter is that we are rather good at this dying thing.

Sermon Ideas

1. He Dies for Me (That the Holy Spirit would engender a holy awe in the hearer and strengthen the faith of the hearer in Jesus Christ.)

There are really two mountains in today's sermon. We stand today on the mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. But in the distance is another mountain we will climb with these disciples and our Lord in less than two months. That mountain in the hazy distance is of course the mount of Calvary. Jesus will largely be alone that day. We will be at a distance, fearful and stunned by what transpires.

The only hope we have for that day is what stuns us on this day. Today we are close to him. He has invited us along to pray with him. But he has not only invited us but he has also invited some other friends of his, old friends: Moses and Elijah. Jesus is revealed for who he really is, the Son of God, the Incarnate Logos. To our amazement the very Creator of this universe has been walking dusty roads and dealing with foolish people graciously.

The two mountains are important today because Transfiguration's mountain reveals the true nature of that One who climbs the other bitter hill. On that day he will not glow with heaven's splendor. No ancient prophets will attend his way. Instead, cruel soldiers will goad him on. His disciples will flee. Only women will have the courage to attend him but all they can do is wail after him. He will not look like the Son of God that day, at least to our human eyes.

For this reason we need this day's message to be heard and firmly taken to heart. The Jesus who ascended Calvary's height was none other than the very Son of God, this glow-in-the-dark figure who stuns us with his glory. Because it is this Jesus who dies, his death therefore has meaning. It is significant on a cosmic scale. It even reverberates to this corner of the globe some two thousand years later.

Because it was this Jesus who died my sins are forgiven, my life is restored, indeed the whole creation is restored in Christ (Romans 8:18-21.) With that whole creation we await the revealing of the sons of God on that last day when this same Jesus will return. No one will mistake who he is on that day. The myriads of angels at his side and the unfiltered glory of God shining from his face will allow for no confusion.

But while many will pray that the mountains fall upon them to cover them lest they see his glory (Rev. 6:15-17), we will rejoice and not be afraid. We will see him as he is but we will also be like him in some way and able to bear that sight (I John 3:1-3). For we recognize that this Jesus has climbed that other hill on which he died for us. And that makes all the difference in the world.

We will walk out these doors today into a world which is beset by sin and death. It is all around us. It even crosses the threshold of this holy place and takes root in these pews. Like that other day, that Friday we call Good, it is hard to see this Jesus for what he really is. Sometimes he seems to still be buried, unraised, obscured by millennia of filth. Let the Spirit of God peel all that way for us today. The Jesus whose body and blood we eat here, the Jesus who touched us in our baptismal water, the Jesus whose voice is heard from this pulpit and in every absolution spoken by every Christian round the world, that Jesus is God's Son. He really can do what he says he does, restore and forgive and cleanse the whole world, even you.

2. The Eighth Day – living in this world and the next (That the hearer would stand in awe of the transcendent mystery of worship, here we stand with Peter, James, and John, in the presence of Angels, Archangels, and all the company of heaven – citizens of the new creation, still wending our way through the old)

I develop this under the Gospel lesson somewhat, but this is really a sermon about the marvel of worship. Christian Schultz, the researcher and author behind Natural Church Development, says that thriving and growing communities of faith all have a few things in common, and one of those things is that their worship is inspiring and the spirituality in those growing communities is passionate. This sermon, putting the Christian into the shoes of the disciples seeks to help the worshiper be inspired by what happens and passionate in his/her prayers.

For a Lutheran, unlike the many reformed, Arminian, and other bodies which dot the landscape, will find that inspiration in a faithful perception of a transcendent reality in worship. When I hold that wafer in my hand, I believe that wafer is nothing less than God

in the flesh, when the chalice touches my lips, God in the flesh communes with me. When the water splashes on another sinner in this font, God is touching them, just like he touched the lepers and the blind and the broken people of Jesus day. When the absolution is spoken, God's authoritative word echoes to our hearing. We are much, much more than the handful of humble folks who have gathered in this place because we have subscribed to the marketed message of this congregation. We are with angels and archangels, we are with all the company of heaven. Moses and Elijah sing with us when we lift our voices in the hymns and songs. We blend with all the blind and lepers who shouted "Lord have mercy!" if we sing the Kyrie. If the Sanctus adorns our worship, that is an echo of Isaiah's vision and the crowds on Palm Sunday. Simeon's song, and angelic choruses are part of our repertoire.

Of course this might just say something about our attitudes toward worship. Do I find that the eye drops down to the watch if the service is a little too long? The preacher does too, don't forget that. It is very easy to forget this. The old creation clings tightly to us, but God is at work in the new creation, the eighth day of all this. He is lifting us to see something new at work in us and our fellow congregants. He is opening our eyes and rousing us from a deep slumber so that we see and believe, rejoice and take our place in heaven's choir this morning. God interestingly delights in our songs. He loves our music.

3. When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (That the Spirit of God would convict the hearer and move him/her to relinquish the idolatrous images of Jesus which our humanity demands and embrace the Jesus who is revealed in Epiphany and who descends with us into the Lenten plain and Calvary's mournful peak.)

For this one I am extending the text just a little bit, out to verse 51, the place where Luke penned the sermon title's quotation. This sermon is similar to the one we postulated a few weeks ago when we heard the story of Jesus' rejection in his own home town. Peter wants to hang onto the successful, glow-in-the-dark Jesus who exudes power and speaks with important people. But that is a theology of Glory. True salvation is to be found in the Jesus who set that aside, who walks with them down to the obscurity of the plain and the tumult below. Jesus encounters demons and disappointment in the verses which follow.

Luke tells us that Jesus makes the deliberate, conscious decision to head to Jerusalem, to set his face to the cross. He knows exactly what awaits him there. He is not some peasant caught up in the imperial machinery and whom we will see as some martyr for a social cause. He is not like Ghandi or Dr. King or Abraham Lincoln in that, though all those men died as well. He is greater, for he understands, even plans, that his death is more than an inspiration to us, it is the very act of salvation.

We want to hang onto that glory; it is much more appealing to us. We like it, and we long for the day when Jesus will show up looking like he does here. We long for the day of consummation. Paul prayed “Maranatha” with the folks in Corinth because they longed for it too and he did as well.

But the salvation of the world is not accomplished in the revelation of God’s great glory, but in the humble deed which Jesus performs when brutal but weak men abuse him, torture him, and finally kill him. It is not in the powerful confrontation with powerful evil that we are saved, but in the humble submission and loss of life, what appears to our eyes to be a total defeat at the hands of evil. Peter, James, and John are not Jesus proper company, but Moses and Elijah are. This day makes the very important assertion that Jesus deliberately descends to that cross for the salvation of the world. It is a strange way to save the world, but it is God’s way.

So it is with us as well. We get this glimpse of Jesus’ glory, here and elsewhere in Scripture, and it would be so nice to pray only to that Jesus, to long for that Jesus to show up. When he comes, all the problems are over, all the worries are done, and we are the very heirs of heaven, the richest folk in all the world. But that longing can blind us to the real work of Christ. He comes down from this mountain to the teeming and sinful mass of humanity, to heal and help, to feed and comfort. He invites us to the greater task today. He will take care of the glorious part of all this for us. Right now he offers us the chance to walk down this mountain to Lenten service and holy sacrifice with him.

4. What is Moses doing on this hill? (That this word would comfort the hearer with the assurance that the Promised Land, which often seems so far away, is as near as Jesus. He makes himself present to us today, and brings to us a promise of a better house, a better land to which he will bring us in his merciful and loving arms, flung wide on Calvary’s cross.)

(The challenge of this sermon will be to keep it reasonable – don’t go too long!)

Have you ever been told you cannot go somewhere? God told Moses he could not go, then, almost cruelly, puts him on a mountain to show him the whole land, but still he cannot go. When I am told I cannot do something, the desire only grows. Did Moses feel that way? I would have.

It is a little like having tickets to the Super Bowl and then contracting the flu so you cannot go. TV would no longer suffice, would it? We might think that Satan keeps us from heaven, but we don’t have a Satan problem as much as we have a God problem. He is the one who keeps the sinners from heaven. Satan just likes that. Like Moses gazing out from Nebo’s peak, we can see glimpses of heavenly joy in a child’s laughter, in a beautiful day, in a number of ways, but it is only a glimpse, only a fleeting thing. Soon we are brought back down hard to earth. Like the Epistle lesson last week, we know in part and see through a glass dimly. We see, we know, but only enough to know and see

that we are miserable where we are. Our sin keeps us from the promised land of heaven and all its joys.

Moses had been told that he could not set foot in this Promised Land. He was forbidden for he had not obeyed the command of God. Yet, we see him today, standing on the mountain of Transfiguration, in the Promised Land, the very place he should not be. What is up here? God has brought him to that land which even his 120 years and unabated strength could not bring him. It is in a holy conversation with Jesus that he stands there and his disappointment is taken away. His presence in that Promised Land is as a guest of Jesus.

Peter would play the host here, but the text says that he does not know what he is saying. Likewise, we are guests here today, invited to join these heavenly choirs and angelic worshippers. We are guests, so that Jesus may make himself present to us and we may catch a glimpse of his glory. But that glimpse, that foretaste, is not our word, but His word of encouragement. He has better things in mind for us. The foretaste of heaven which is this holy supper is not the full feast, and yet it partakes of it. Christ has made himself accessible to us, setting aside his heavenly glory, but still owning it for our sake.

Jesus speaks of his departure with Moses and Elijah, a departure (exodus) which he will accomplish in Jerusalem, when he dies upon that cross.

Right now we stand on the cusp of Lent. Jesus will descend this hill with us and the rest of his disciples and make a long and sometimes difficult journey to that Friday called Good and that Sunday called Easter. Tears will be wept along the way, for he goes to bear and suffer and die for the sins of the world, your sins and mine.

But today, for our encouragement and joy, he has revealed himself to us. We can see where we are heading here, we can see where this ends. We pray today that we want to be co-heirs with this Jesus. The glory which he has today, he promises to us. He brought Moses to that light, he brings us as well. It looks so far away to us, sometimes, but the truth be told, Christ can open that door at a moment's notice, in fact, he is the door! We see a long and difficult road in front of us, but the glory of God, the Son of God, the Jesus who is the Way, Truth, and Life, is walking beside us all the way. We have access to that glory, in his gracious act, always.

5. What is Moses Doing Here? (Epistle, OT, and Gospel – That the hearer would passionately listen to and live for Christ.)

Unlike the prior sermon this one is asking an authority/significance question. In short our answer is that Jesus is the Incarnate Word of God – that is what Moses has been serving his whole life. That is what Moses is doing here. He has come to see Jesus.

For a Jewish person this would have been huge. Moses was the greatest human who ever lived. He talked to God face to face, and no one ever did that. But to whom did he talk?

Do we imagine some disembodied voice coming out of the tent? I suppose it could have, but it says, "face to face." It was Jesus he was talking to. The same for Elijah. When it says that the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and the other prophets, that was the same Word which dwelt among us and revealed God's glory (John 1:14-18)

That same Jesus, that real God, that true king of all creation, that Jesus turns his face toward you. That is his promise made in Baptism. That Jesus listens to your prayers. That Word of God cares about your life and would make it shine like the stars. (Philippians 2:14-16)

How can we sit here yawning when that Jesus is here, the one who glowed with heavenly glory in our Gospel lesson? Moses has travelled from heaven to earth to have this conversation with his Lord. Elijah has gotten down from his chariot and whirlwind to hear what this Jesus has to say. God himself has urged us, "Listen to him!" He is the very Word of Life.

Like Moses Jesus speaks a beautiful word to us and we can hang upon his every syllable. For he has spoken not the judgment which we deserved but the gracious forgiveness which God has always wanted. Moses was there to hear about Jesus' "exodus." Much better than Moses event with its pillar of fire and cloud, manna and water from a rock, parting seas and plagues, Jesus Exodus is leading all of sinful humanity out of the bondage to sin and death.

Wednesday is of course Ash Wednesday. I have included a few thoughts on a possible sermon for this day, but since many of us subscribe to a prepared Lenten series, I have not invested too much. If you want to know more, please shoot me an email and we can talk more.

Ash Wednesday –

Almighty and everlasting God, you despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Joel 2:12-19

¹²"Yet even now," declares the LORD,

"return to me with all your heart,

with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

¹³and rend your hearts and not your garments."

Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.

¹⁴ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?

¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶gather the people.

Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.

¹⁷ Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.

Why should they say among the peoples,
"Where is their God?"

¹⁸ Then the LORD became jealous for his land
and had pity on his people.

¹⁹The LORD answered and said to his people, "Behold, I am sending to you
grain, wine, and oil,
and you will be satisfied;
and I will no more make you
a reproach among the nations.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

¹ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

"In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you."

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

¹"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷"*And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ Pray then like this:*

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹²and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Sermon Ideas for Ash Wednesday

1. A treasure laid up in heaven for us. (That the hearer would engage in the Lenten fast, preparing him/herself to faithfully observe the Passion of our Lord and celebrate with sincere Easter Joy.)

This night we gather to “kick off” a holy season of Lent. This evening I want to couch this whole season for us, talk a little about it, and what it is here to do. Lent is terribly important to us. We live in a world in which sadness is all but considered a mental illness. If you are a little blue, the Doctor has a prescription for that. While I am a broadly generous person when it comes to different styles of music, the fact is that there is a great deficit within most contemporarily written music for worship. It simply does not adequately address the whole range of emotions. In short, it is just too perky. It picks through the psalms and focuses on the happy verses. But David sang of the whole emotional range of the human being. Lent is important because it sanctifies our sadness, it brings even our sorrow into the house of God that he may bless it and work even its minor key into the heavenly symphony. If we cannot bring it in here, if it has no place in our conversation with God, are we not really saying that he doesn't have the answer for that? If our worship must always be upbeat and chipper, do we not miss out on something here?

Lent is a time when Christians gather to recognize that we are a people who needed a Savior. And there is reason to be sad in that. For we needed the forgiveness which Jesus proffered at Calvary, the ashes on our heads proclaim it. Tonight we have remembered that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. It is gloomy, if you think about it and I really hope you think about it.

Now, our Lenten sadness is not a sadness without hope. In fact, because we have the hope and the faith which looks to Jesus, his cross, and his resurrection, we can honestly and actually confront the sadness and the reason for the sadness. If we had no hope we would be forced into a grim faced denial of the truth or slip into a terrible despair. No, our

Lenten sadness is a hopeful sadness. Easter comes and brings new life and true joy to us. But now, this time, we reflect on our great need for Jesus in the sure and certain faith that he has indeed come at our great need.

Why do we need Jesus? As he himself points out for us tonight, we cannot even get our worship straight most of the time. Even our fasting can be a place where our pride and vanity comes out. Joel urges his people to a true repentance in the face of a terrible plague. Did you hear how he exhorted the priests to take their place? Sin, the broken relationship with God, manifests itself in the whole of life. Perhaps we are so used to it that we have simply grown used to it, think that death is natural, that broken families and corruption and poverty and misery are simply the human lot. But this season asks us to look at our lives through God's eyes and see how much we really lost when Adam and Eve sinned. This season asks us to look at just how much we need Jesus.

He comes tonight with bread for this journey and words of comfort. We walk to a cross, a bitter place, where his body and blood will be broken. Tonight we feast on that broken body and blood, but do so in faith. He rose, and empowered this meal for us. It is the strength we need to make this journey, for all its gloomy sadness. He will walk with us every step of the way, carry us when necessary. He knows where this journey leads, its end. He knows the Easter truth that he has died for every one of the sins and hurts and miseries which confront us. There is not an enemy bigger than his blood. Come with me, we journey to Easter, through holy Lenten tears.

2. Now is the Day of Salvation (That the hearer would repent for God is gracious and hears our prayers and forgives our sins.)

It is easy to lose sight of Lent's purpose and this sermon wants to help the hearer remember/realize what Lent is about, but also simply to do the Lenten deed: repent.

We are probably hearing people ask "are you giving up something for Lent?" Such a practice might be healthful and good for our spirit in these days. It reminds us of Christ's sacrifice for us. But better is to give up sin, to take up an ancient battle which no one but Jesus has won.

Lent brings us back to the very heart and core of our Christianity. It is easy to forget this in the context of church meetings, complicated relationships, worship planning, and raising funds. The Church can sometimes feel like an organization of like-minded individuals who are sometimes not very like-minded! The government understands us that way and it is easy to succumb to that definition of who we are. But we are not people who are like-minded and who have banded together into a voluntary association. We are the Church – sinners whom God has called together that he may forgive them.

The Lenten and Easter seasons are large reminders of that essential character of our faith. For forty days we repent. For fifty days God declares his abundant pardon. Notice the

pardon is larger than the repentance. God's grace is always bigger than the problem of sin.

Paul exhorts us to receive the Grace of God, to take advantage of this day of God's favor. Lent is a time to bring your whole life to God, all the messy, ugly, and difficult parts and lay them at his feet. Don't hold back. For forty days let it lay bare for his holy gaze. It will be uncomfortable. The old man inside us will howl with fear and will be unable to bear this. Be on your guard against him. He will try to subvert this. But he is a fool and does not know the love of God. Lay it out there. All of it. Hold nothing back. Do not imagine that your sins are too much or that you can enter heaven's fullness while harboring some secret and private sin. You cannot. Let the light shine on it all. Bring your whole life to this discussion. Not only your guilt, but also your sorrow, pain, and humiliation. Bring your failures, errors, sickness, grief, and desires. Every disordered hunger, every missed opportunity, every fear, bring them all! His grace is sufficient.

Jesus has not come to pat us on the head and say good job. He has come to die because our lives are just that messed up. He has come to be the sacrifice for us because our lives are no more fit for heaven than a rotting bit of garbage is fit for heaven. In order for us to enjoy the full measure of God's presence as we were created to do, Jesus has to fix us, heal us, forgive us, and raise us.

This Lenten season is designed to bring us to that cross on Good Friday and that tomb of Easter morning as people whom Jesus heals, raises, cleanses, and comforts.