

## Transfiguration Sunday – Foreshadows the light that explodes

(The basic line for a sermon for Transfiguration Sunday.)

In this season of Epiphany we remember that the Lord works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. We are coming out of winter, the darkest time of year. We celebrate the coming of the light. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). During this season the light has been increasing. Soon it will explode.

This last Sunday in Epiphany is Transfiguration Sunday. In the gospel text for today we are brought the mountaintop. From there we look out over the valley below and look forward to the horrible events to come. What lies below is darkness still, the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus will be abandoned, betrayed, mocked, suffer and die. The coming season of Lent is the season of the dark night of the soul. But today the Transfiguration foreshadows what happens after Good Friday: The light that explodes on Easter Sunday.

**What is Lent?** We think of it as a period of privation, a penitential season whose purpose is to draw us away from every day distractions in order to focus on the big question: **What about forever?**

Because Lent follows the liturgical calendar, the exact date that Lent falls each year changes. Lent begins 46 days before Easter (40 days of fasting and 6 Sundays). The liturgical color for Lent is **purple** because it is associated with mourning and so anticipates the pain and suffering of the crucifixion, and secondly because **purple** is the color associated with royalty, and celebrates Christ's resurrection and sovereignty.

Lent is about the dark night of the soul. As Isaiah writes: “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who **walks in darkness and has no light**, yet **trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?**” (Isaiah 50:10).

The phrase, “the dark night of the soul,” was coined by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish monk who lived shortly after Martin Luther. St. John of the Cross was imprisoned for eight months by his own monastery for his unconventional beliefs. In his confinement he wrote the “divine rays of darkness” through which God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

In Lent we face our own mortality. We are unlike God. From dust to dust. Some talk today of “dying with dignity.” Humph. What are they thinking? The truth is our bodies break down – sometimes when we are old and sometimes before we are even born. It **always** happens, and there is **never** any dignity in it. It doesn't matter if you die young, or are old and feeble. Dying is **always** ugly, **always**. You can live with dignity, but you can't die with it.

Lent is a wake-up call: We are decaying. We are a heart-beat away from death and on our way to nothingness. Lent asks of us: What about forever? The hymn, “Abide with Me,” conveys this message:

Abide with me, Fast falls the eventide.  
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.  
Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away  
**Change and decay in all around I see,**  
O, thou who changest not, Abide with me.

The hymn, "When peace like a river," captures the sadness of this decaying world and the glory of the cross and resurrection.

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
When **sorrow, like sea billows, roll;**  
Whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though **Satan should buffet, though trials should come,**  
Let this blest assurance control,  
**That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate**  
And hath shed his own blood for my soul.

He lives – oh the bliss of this glorious thought,  
**My sin,** not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to his cross, and **I bear it no more,**  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

The dark night of the soul is about facing decay and death and asking: What about forever? The "crux" of our faith is that Christ has regarded our helpless estate. Our sins, not in part, but the whole, are nailed to his cross and we bear them no more. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

**The Transfiguration.** In the gospel for today, the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop takes place a few days after Jesus has first told his disciples that he must suffer and die. They are offended, scandalized. What is this about? Peter grabs Jesus and objects: Far be it from you to die; it can't happen. We'll back you up. We're here for you.

Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matt 16:23). In other words, Peter, you don't get it. You are caught up in things of this world. You are distracted by the lights of this world. Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). There are many good things to be done in this world. In all kinds of factories, industries, and institutions. There are good mission projects to be done in the church, too, here and abroad. But the main thing is always: What about forever?

Then comes our text for today. Jesus leads Peter, James, and John to a "high mountain." There his appearance is radiantly transformed. They behold his glory. "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." He is the answer to: What about forever?

Life is suffering. Horrible things happen. But that's not all there is. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. Even though I decay, I shall fear no evil. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). The Lord works in mysterious ways his wonders to proclaim.

As Luther said, in the Christian life there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. We have our own battles with evil within us. There are battles around us and outside of us. Evil is powerful. But it doesn't

have the last word: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). And 2 Peter 1:16-19:

"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. 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,' we heard this voice born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain....You will do well to pay attention to this as to **a lamp shining in a dark place**, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts."

The Transfiguration story is "a lamp shining in a dark place." At the end of Epiphany, right before Lent, it illumines the dark night of the soul ahead. Jesus was going toward Jerusalem. We are moving toward Good Friday. Death awaits him. Death awaits us. But today we are given "a lamp shining in the darkness." The Transfiguration foreshadows the explosion of light to come.

**The Light that Explodes.** That explosion is Easter morning, this year, April 12th. And when you come to church on Easter morning, what kind of sermon will you hear? A funeral sermon. Yes, an Easter sermon is a funeral sermon. When you think about it, the similarities are striking. At a funeral we mourn the death of a loved one; we also proclaim the "crux" of our faith: the cross and resurrection.

We are like all other people in that all people decay and die. It is the universal condition. We are not like those who "have no hope and are without God" (Eph 2:12).

Paul writes: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:21). This is not stating a general truth, but answering the question: What about forever? On the mountaintop he is the one transfigured, clothed in radiant light, because he brings life eternal.

As we face the darkness of Lent, we are among those who have seen the light, that is, been given a foretaste of the resurrection to come, a lamp shining in the darkness. His Word is truth. Though we decay, he is mighty and comes to save:

"He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:7-10).

Because he did, everything is changed. The light explodes in the darkness. The darkness is overcome. He did it. He swallowed up sin, death, and the devil. And has come to claim us for his kingdom. He does claim by his Word and in his sacraments. Therefore, in advance of Easter, in expectation of the explosion of light to come, even today, we sing:

**Christ the Lord is Risen Today!**

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!  
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!  
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!  
Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!

**Christ is Risen! Alleluia**

Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Risen our victorious head!  
Sing his praises! Alleluia! Christ is risen from the dead!  
Gratefully our hearts adore him As his light once more appears;  
Bowing down in joy before him, Rising up from griefs and tears.

**Thine is the Glory**

Thine is the glory, risen conquering Son  
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death has won!  
Angels in bright raiment, Rolled the stone away,  
Kept the folded grave cloths, where thy body lay.  
Thine is the glory, Risen, conquering Son;  
**Endless is the victory Thou o'er death has won!**