

The Transfiguration foreshadows the light that explodes

A sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 17:1-9; Second Peter 1:16-19

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 the 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 to 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, die, and rise again. 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 of Lent 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 of 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 about "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 not like God. From dust to dust. Some talk today of “dying with dignity.” Humph. What are they thinking? The truth is our bodies break down, often when we are old and sometimes before we are even born. It **always** happens, and there is **never** any dignity to 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 dignity.

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 lesson, 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.

In other words, Peter doesn't get it. He is caught up in things of this world. He is distracted by the lights of this world. As Paul reminds us: “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 professions, 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?

The text for today continues. 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” (Matt 17:5). He is the answer to: What about forever?

Luther said that in the battle with the Devil there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. We each have 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 born 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 9th. 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.

Paul writes: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). This answers the question: What about forever? On the mountaintop Jesus 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, we have been given a foretaste of the resurrection to come, a lamp shining in the darkness. His Word is truth. Though we decay, he is almighty 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).

He claims us through his Word and in his sacraments. Therefore, even today in advance of Easter, in expectation of the explosion of light to come, 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!