

The Transfiguration foreshadows the light that explodes

Mark 9:2-9

A sermon for Transfiguration Sunday

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the coming of the light. As the Gospel of John states: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). During this winter season the light has been growing stronger. Soon it will explode.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the Festival of the Transfiguration. In the Gospel text 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 deep darkness, 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.

What is that about? We commonly think of Lent as a time of depriving ourselves of something we enjoy, a penitential season. While giving-up-something-for-Lent can be a useful practice, it can also be another kind of I-can-make-it-happen "spirituality," a false religion, a way of applauding and punishing ourselves. In short, another way of playing God. The real purpose of Lent 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.

The phrase, "the dark night of the soul," was coined by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Catholic monk and mystic poet, who lived shortly after Martin Luther and became a major figure in the Counter-Reformation.

As you know, darkness is a common motif in Scripture. 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?**" (See Isaiah 50:10. And the darkness, the deep darkness, is found in Psalm 23:4: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."; in Hebrew "shadow of death" is "deep darkness," including illness, tragedy, and our own death.)

We are from "dust to dust," and Lent is a wake-up call: We are a heart-beat away from death and on our way to nothingness. What about forever?

The answer has edges and is beautifully, if not precisely, expressed in the hymn, "When peace like a river":

"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!"

We are wanna-be gods, rebels; we are caught in darkness, lost, and helpless. Yet Christ has regarded our helpless estate. Our sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to his cross, and we bear it no more.

The Transfiguration. In the Gospel text 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 will abandon and betray the Lord. As Paul reminds us: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14). Like Peter, we are caught up in things of this world. We are easily swayed by angels of light, distracting us, leading us astray. We, too, betray him even as we claim to serve him.

The text 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; listen to him" (Mark 9:7; Psalm 2:7). He is Lord and there is no other, besides him there is no God (Isaiah 45:5).

Luther said that in the battle with the Devil, there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success. No private miracles, no sign, except the sign of Jonah (Matt. 16:4). Yet Luther was sustained in his struggle against the Devil by his rediscovery that "the just shall **live** by faith alone," and life does not begin in heaven; eternal life begins in Baptism.

An axiom in the Middle Ages was: "Remember your death." Luther took this medieval axiom and turned it on its head. He wrote: "In the midst of earthly life, snares of death surround us.' But the voice of the Gospel cheers the terrified sinner with its song: 'In the midst of certain death, life in Christ is ours" (LW 13:83).

Heiko Oberman's translation gives added insight: "In the midst of life we are ringed 'round by death,' but the Gospel reverses this, saying: 'In the midst of death we are ringed 'round by life,' because we have the forgiveness of sin."

That's what it's about: The forgiveness of sin.

Jesus came down from the mountain and headed toward Jerusalem. We are moving toward Good Friday. Death await him. Death awaits us.

The Light that Explodes. 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).

He is "the first fruits." He lives. Though we decay and die, he comes to save. Again, Paul:

"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 is Lord of lords and King of kings. The light explodes. The tomb is empty. Therefore, even now on Transfiguration Sunday, "the voice of the Gospel cheers the terrified sinner with its song":

Thine is the Glory

Thine is the glory, risen conquering Son
Endless is the victory, thou o'er death hast 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 hast won!

Amen