

Sermon Transfiguration 2020

February 2, 2020

Matthew 17:1-9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

As we see the disciples coming up the mountain with Jesus, and we see Jesus transfigured before them, shining like the sun in their presence, I often try to imagine what that must have been like for them. I mean what an amazing experience right? Can you picture that? This man whom you know to be pious and amazingly wise taking you up on the mountain and shining? It would be amazing. Of course, then the cloud appears, and the voice of God comes from the cloud saying that this is His beloved Son! Like Peter says, they were eyewitnesses to that! They saw it. But then what happened? Matthew says that the disciples fell on their faces in fear. Now I can imagine that seeing all of this would easily evoke any number of involuntary responses. But what's at the heart of the fear? They are in the presence of God. This is the God who is holy. The God who calls them to be holy; Who says, "be holy as I am holy." And yet no matter how holy we think ourselves in our day to day lives, or as I'll talk about more in a minute, no matter how much holiness isn't a category that dwells much in our daily thought processes, when that reality strikes us that we're standing before God, or that we will be standing before God, it evokes a fear. It evokes the realization of just how unholy we are.

But of course, we don't talk about holiness much in our culture. We barely talk about what is sacred. And what is sacred? Here we are celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, but what's the "real" high feast today? It's Super Bowl Sunday, right? It's the day everyone gathers around the altar of their television and they pay homage to the demigods who battle one another in the arena. They assemble with great effort the sacrifices of their feasts. That's sacred now. Or what else is sacred? Sports are sacred, in many ways having taken the place of the community of the Church gathered around her Lord, but the realm of feelings is sacred too, isn't it? You can't tell someone that something they're feeling might be wrong. Do you feel a certain way? That's always to be supported. Do you feel like you should leave your wife to marry your mistress? It must be right. Do you feel like God's even calling you to do that? He must be. It's sacred.

Now to be clear as I say that, feelings aren't inherently evil—we should realize how deceiving they can be, but they're not inherently evil. I say that often of how emotional the love our God shows to us in Christ makes me. It should. But that feeling must only be trusted when it is created by the Word, or at the least doesn't contradict it. Likewise,

watching the Super Bowl isn't wrong. We'll be having food and watching it too in our family. It's fun. It just can't replace the true God. But hopefully you see the point, these things are sacred in our day. But we don't understand holiness.

And yet we see that our God is holy. We see that as Moses stepped into His presence on that mountain. And as I say that, I hope you note the connection here. We have Moses on the mountain, God revealing Himself to him there, just as we have Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration revealing Himself to the disciples, interesting with Moses appearing with Him—and Elijah too, which is important. But there's Moses, if you recall he'd run away from Egypt having killed the Egyptian who was mistreating the Israelites. He'd gone off and married his wife, the daughter of Jethro that we heard about. Now he's tending Jethro's flock and there he is on the mountain, when God appears! And what does God say? **Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.** And he said, **"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."** And what does Moses do? He hides His face. There is holiness, and so He hides.

So as we see this, then, we ask: what does this mean that God is holy? Well, Merriam Webster says it well when it says that to be holy means to be: "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness." That's God isn't it? Worthy of complete devotion as One who is perfect in goodness and righteousness. God is perfectly good. He is perfectly righteous. He is set apart as the Hebrew word for holy has at its root. He is cut apart from all other things because He is good and right.

In view of that I can't help but think about some of the presentations I heard at the symposia I went to last week. We talked about atonement, about Jesus' work as atoning, and what that meant. And as the presenters talked about that, they made the point that you see the picture of what Jesus did in the Old Testament. Now, many of you probably have some idea, but that being a vague idea, of the sacrifices in the Old Testament. You see, what would happen in that tabernacle, in the Temple then in Jesus' day, is that the priest would have the "Divine Service" so to speak daily. Morning and evening he would sacrifice offerings. Among those were the offerings of animals. A lamb in the morning and a lamb in the evening. They would be offered for the sins of the people. And here there's a glimpse, a foreshadowing of what Jesus did, the perfect Lamb of God. But what is this actually? Why this sacrifice?

Well, I heard this explained as doing two things. First propitiation. This was a satisfaction. There was wrong and that wrong had to be righted, paid for. Just like if I borrow your car and wreck it, I need to pay for it, so also sin requires a payment. What is

that payment? A life. Specifically, the Bible says blood. The life is in the blood, so blood atonement is required. Why? Sin causes death and so life has to be given. Second is expiation; cleansing. Sin taints what it touches. If you sin, you are tainted and need cleansing. If you are sinned against you are tainted and need cleansing. Expiation. And both of those are explained by God's holiness.

God is good so He can't just wave a wand and pretend like the wrong against Him of sin didn't happen. Likewise, He's pure, He can't stand in the presence of the impurity of sin. His holiness will destroy whatever it touches that isn't holy. Hence the fear.

But as I say all of this, something that struck me as I was hearing this was what I've been saying: we don't think about God in these terms. We just sort of think about Him as this mushy love God. But it all comes back to this and should be understood in relation to it. How we enter into His presence should be grounded in that understanding. And so I was trying to figure out how we can make this connection. How can we understand this? Sure there's this inherent knowledge that we have, but how do we connect to that in a way that can be grasped.

One of the presenters, though made a great connection; actually a Biblical one: the conscience. You see when you feel guilty it's because there's a realization that you've been tainted. When you've been sinned against and there's a sense of shame, or violation, or of just "blech," you realize you've been tainted. And that's where this Jesus comes and He cleanses it.

You see something that's neat with the Old Testament sacrifices, they would do these offerings morning and evening every day, and in between the priests would take additional sacrifices that people brought, and they would sacrifice them on the altar in front of the tent. But then on the Day of Atonement, a special sacrifice would be made. On that day, the priest would go into the Holy of Holies, the most Holy Place, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was, and he would put blood on that Ark. Then he would take some of that same blood and bring it out to the altar where these sacrifices had been made day in and day out. And what God gave in that action was a picture: this is what Jesus would do. As we bring the tainting of our sin, as we bring the shame of sins that people commit against us, as we dump all of that upon Him, He brings His blood, that blood poured out not on an altar of bronze, but on the cross of Calvary, He brings that blood and He satisfies the justice it requires. He brings that blood and He cleanses the impurity of it so that it's gone. If you compare it to the car wrecked, the wreck has been paid for. If you compare it to dirt on your skin, you are now perfectly clean. It's done and it's paid for.

And He brings this to you in the cleansing waters of baptism, where you're joined to the promise of New Life in His resurrection. He speaks that comforting and cleansing Word, the Word that makes you holy as He is holy. And He feeds you with His body given, His life, given in place of yours, and His blood shed for you is the drink He gives you, so that you are clean. Christians, what a comfort. Your conscience can now be relieved. You don't have to bear the guilt, you can know that your shame is gone. It's covered over by Jesus. Paid for by Him, cleansed by Him.

Now as I say all of that, you might be wondering what this has to do with this whole thing of Jesus and the Transfiguration. Well, first of all, as we see Jesus shining as this Holy God on that mountain, we see that He is the Holy God then who took on this unholiness of sin. What an amazing thing!! Do you see it?!! That's the greatest mystery of the whole Christian faith. Sure we marvel at the Trinity, that God could be One God, but still be three Persons. That's a mystery. We marvel that Jesus could be both God and man. That's a mystery. But most mysterious of all is that He, in His holiness, took upon Himself to carry unholy sin to the cross. That's showing itself in the Transfiguration.

But the other thing, I think is beautiful. I was struck by it this week as I studied this passage; I hadn't it caught before. When the terrifying voice of God comes, He says, "**This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.**" And on the one hand I had always thought this meant we should listen to all that Jesus said. And of course it does mean that. It means hear every word you can from this blessed man, God in the flesh. But look at the first word Jesus speaks to Peter, James, and John after the Father says this. Here there's been this cloud, this voice, this fear, and what happens? Jesus comes and Matthew says He "**touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear.'**"

Peter, James, and John, listen to this One, the One who says, "Rise, and have no fear." Christian, you listen to this One who says, "Rise, and have no fear." Listen to Him. When your conscience feels the burden of your sin, when you feel terrible about your standing before this Holy God because of it, "Rise, and have no fear." When you've committed what you think of as a whopper of a sin, "Rise, and have no fear." When you feel like you can't come before God in prayer because of sin, "Rise, and have no fear." And when others violate your conscience, when they harm you and sin against you, "Rise, and have no fear." You are baptized, absolved, washed and fed in the holiness of Jesus. Have no fear. This God has made you holy. He loves you and has borne unholiness upon Himself for you. "Rise, and have no fear." Amen.