

Sermon Draft

Text: Exodus 24:8–18

Sermon: Transfiguration Sunday 2020

Green is the liturgical color of the Epiphany season. The season begins, however, with white on the Epiphany of Our Lord and ends with white on the Transfiguration of Our Lord. White is the color used for festivals of our Lord Jesus: Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, plus the Circumcision and Name of Jesus, Presentation, Annunciation, and Visitation.

The purpose of the events on Mount Sinai in our text from Exodus 24 was to ratify the covenant of grace between God and his chosen people through the shedding of blood and to prefigure the sacrificial fulfillment for the sins of the world through the promised Messiah.

The Festival of the Transfiguration of Our Lord serves as a wonderful transition from Epiphany to Ash Wednesday and Lent.

The manifestation of the Godman at his Epiphany climaxes in majestic glory on Mount Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration, which looks forward to the greater revelation of the Lord's glory on the cross. That is really to say, then, that the Transfiguration bids us look to three mountains where the Lord's face shines upon us.

Christ's shining face on the Mount of Transfiguration looks back to God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. One day, Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a high mountain, and suddenly he was transfigured; his face shone like the sun (Matthew 17:1–2). Moses and Elijah were there with Jesus (17:3). Peter wanted to stay and set up tents (17:4)! But a cloud and a voice terrified the disciples (17:5–6). Then Jesus touched them: ***“Rise, and have no fear”*** (17:7). In a dramatic way, all this confirmed Jesus as the Messiah, God's Son; the disciples were to listen to no one but him only (17:8).

We know the story well, but what is the meaning of the presence of Moses? In our Old Testament Reading, our text, fifteen hundred years before Jesus' transfiguration, Moses had been present at another appearance of the Lord's shining glory at Mount Sinai (vs 9–11, 16–17). On that occasion, God was confirming the covenant he had just made when he gave Israel the Ten Commandments. They would be to him a *“kingdom of priests and a holy nation”* (Exodus 19:6). And three times Israel then affirmed they would do all the Lord commanded (19:8; 24:3, 7).

God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai looks forward to Jesus' bloody face on Mount Calvary. Confirming the covenant with Israel required another dramatic act: blood showered on the people (v 8). Bloody sacrifices were the way of God's Old Testament covenants (Leviticus 4:22–26; 8:22–24). Israel's worship always involved blood: Passover, the ark, tabernacle, temple, the sacrifices. Here the blood was actually thrown onto the people as an act of purification.

The new covenant was also inaugurated with blood. Hebrews 9 details the relationship between the old covenant and new (Hebrews 9:16–21). Without blood, there is no forgiveness (9:22). It is Christ who enters the Holy Place as the High Priest, him-self being the sacrifice (9:11–15). This takes place on the third mountain, Mount Calvary. Unlike at Mount Sinai or on the Mount of Transfiguration, here Christ’s face doesn’t appear glorious; it is drawn and bloody. But that is the real glory of the Lord! God’s glory is to save us from our sins and raise us to eternal glory. That is the cross! That’s what Mount Sinai pointed to. It’s what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah talked about at the Transfiguration.

The blood of Mount Calvary is brought forward to us in the Divine Liturgy so that here we, too, see Christ’s shining face. In the Divine Liturgy, we participate in the new covenant in the face of Christ and the Holy Trinity. In listening to Christ’s Word. In receiving the blood of the new covenant. In the Benediction: “The Lord make his face shine upon you!”

And being in the presence of God's glory need not terrify us. ***"They beheld God, and ate and drank"*** (v 11). It is our gracious Christ who touches us and says, ***"Rise, and have no fear."***

First, they saw the flash, blinding, brighter and more brilliant than a dozen suns. Seconds later, they heard the blast and felt the shock waves equivalent to over 20,000 tons of TNT. And then, slowly, majestically, they saw the mushroom cloud, yellow then red then purple then green and finally white rise seven-and-a-half miles into the sky. All while wearing goggles in the safety of a bunker over five miles away. The world's first nuclear detonation, code name Trinity, on July 16, 1945, in the desert of New Mexico, was only a test. But it demonstrated both the beauty and the destructive power of a nuclear explosion. Less than a month later, two atomic bombs brought an end to World War II and to many lives.

Imagine the power! But then realize that the One who created the nucleus of every atom has infinitely greater power. How could anyone exposed to such massive power survive?

“The elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. . . . The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” Yet “the chief men of the people of Israel . . . beheld God, and ate and drank.” And “*Moses entered the cloud*” (Exodus 24:10, 17, 11, 18) just as Peter, James, and John saw the glory of the transfigured Christ and were not destroyed. Why not? Because the Creator of the power of the universe came not to destroy or even to display his glory but veiled it until he had made us holy enough to live in his presence. Until he had gone to the cross.

Following the glorious transfiguration, Jesus leaves the mountain and returns to his ministry in a fallen, sinful, troubled world. He is immediately confronted with a boy who is both sick and possessed.

Then he faces jealousy among his disciples, brothers in the church sinning against one another, unforgiving attitudes, family problems with divorce and children, and so many other results of sin. We leave church, we depart the liturgy and heaven on earth and enter again a sinful and decaying culture. The last thing you hear is me speaking that Aaronic Benediction. It is my voice, but what I say comes from the Lord. It is the Lord who is blessing us with a real, effective, heavenly blessing. “The Lord make his face to shine upon you, be gracious to you and give you peace.” We depart knowing that the Lord’s face is truly shining upon us today and throughout the week. Come what may, we leave with comfort, joy, peace, and hope. And we respond in song as we sing the closing hymn or, as it’s also called, the Hymn to Depart. As we rise to depart, our Lord’s words to his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration echo once more: ***“Rise, and have no fear”*** (Matthew 17:7).

Amen