Sermon for the Feast of the Transfiguration  
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August 6, 2006  
Ex 34:29-35; Ps.99; 2Peter 1:13-21; Lk 9:28-36

“Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;  
all else be naught to me, save that thou art –  
thou my best thought, by day or by night,  
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.”  

_Amen_

(The words of this prayer are words of a familiar hymn; they are Irish and date from thirteen hundred years ago.)

_In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen._

We are not much for the spoken word, you and I. Time was when oratory was considered great art; a recitation or reading or lecture experienced as something like entertainment. Great eloquence – words, spoken words! – in ancient or medieval or even comparatively recent times could rise to the level of spectacle, rivaling chariot races or bear-baiting or – God have mercy on us all – a public execution, for the capacity to draw and hold a crowd.

Today, of course, we’ve for the most part abandoned the spoken word, preferring instead the projected or broadcast _image_. For entertainment, perhaps even for art, and certainly for spectacle, we’ve got NASCAR racing and Monday Night Football, the special effects of the latest disaster movie; Fox news or, dare I say it: Desperate Housewives. _So much for moral progress!_ Even our “talk shows” have become shout fests! We’re not much for the spoken word, you and I.

(So pity, then, the poor preacher! There it is smack in the middle of your service bulletin: “The Sermon.” _The Sermon!_ like some lifeless thing; some vast, cold, empty stretch of space; something to be endured; some penance to be suffered. The Sermon! a march of words emanating from this pulpit; words! just words! making their earnest or stately or cheerful or pedantic or just plain boring way along just above the level of your heads to the back of the church, where they hit the rear wall with a dull thud – and fall in pieces to the floor. No wonder it gets a little dusty back there!)

Well my friends – and I’ve climbed into this pulpit just often enough now, sent enough words out into your midst, to call you friends – I’m with you here today to plead the case for words, even in this spectacle-entranced, image-soaked age. Because I believe the truth is, today, this day, this Feast of the Transfiguration by the Church’s reckoning, and indeed on any occasion when we gather for worship, we enter _through the medium of words_ onto holy ground, ascend _by means of words_ as though climbing a worn and rocky path in brilliant sunshine streaming through billowing clouds stacked high along a ridge – to a summit, a place of prayer, a place of silence, a place of presence.
Words in our worship, this “Liturgy of the Word,” are words of narrative and dialogue and information – as words inevitably are. But here, in worship, in Scripture and in “The Sermon” words are so much more than that. Words in the midst of our worship are the gate, the door, the summons, the path along which we make our way upward! Words are the instrument of creation. (God speaks. And there is light.)

In this power to create, to bring into being, to make us see, to lead us into the depths and heights of things, the words of worship cut through the noise and chatter from our radios and televisions and movies – our entertainment and spectacle; cut through the noise and chatter of the snippets of this and that which dance ceaselessly in our heads.

Words in worship lift us into silence……lift us into a silence where we find ourselves – to our mystification, as though waking from sleep – suddenly raised up, in the presence of God; …there, startled and perhaps even a little afraid, to see God’s glory – revealed, open now to our sight, in the face of Jesus Christ.

So listen with me a moment! Walk with me here. Reach up and grasp the words emanating from the lectern, from this pulpit and making their way along in the air – not above your head, but all around you. Reach to grasp the Word, there in the words of our worship, as you would grasp the hand of a dear friend or deeply loved wife or husband. Take that Word into your hands and your heart and your mind and your spirit, and walk with me a while! For we are setting out together to climb, to ascend, to go up…and this is holy ground. This is the place of God’s presence. This is the place of God’s mercy.

Listen to the words. Luke speaks. “About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up the mountain to pray.”

Listen! Where are we now? To what place have we come? To what time have we come? This is the eighth day – Luke’s word – the eighth day! Take that word to your heart, for there were seven days of creation, and then on Sunday, the first day of the new week, the eighth day of creation, Jesus rose from the dead. The eighth day! A new creation is coming into being……God’s mercy shines now around us like the crystalline light of a mountain peak, light bursting out from the darkness of the tomb to drive away the weight of sleep and distraction and fatigue and fear and confusion.

Where are we now? To what place have we come? “Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up the mountain to pray.” The mountain! Take that word to your heart, for the Scripture we hear in worship tells us the mountain is Moriah where God stayed Abraham’s hand and Isaac lived; the mountain is Sinai, where Moses met God, and when the Israelites saw the face of Moses the skin of his face was shining; the mountain is Horeb where Elijah heard the sheer silence of God’s presence; the mountain is Golgotha, the place of the passion, holy ground, the place of God’s presence, the place of God’s mercy.

We are climbing now, ascending, going up, making our way with the Word along the worn and rocky path taken by so many before us: Abraham and Moses and Elijah and Jesus. (Now, I speak the word – “mountain” – and there in your mind is some picture postcard image, some remembered vacation, some sunset’y snow covered National Geographic, Discovery Channel sort of a thing, an image for our image-soaked age. Set it aside. This is spectacle. This is entertainment. Leave it behind.)
Look now again at this mountain we climb: see it as the ancients did. Here, down in the valley, the seasons change, but the mountain above us is forever timeless, changeless, the peak snow-covered even as here the wind blows hot in summer, cold in winter. The mountaintop is one day brilliantly revealed in bright sunlight, veiled in clouds the next, hidden from sight. The mountain is a place of power, of storms and fire; a place of safety and refuge; a place of beauty, a place of vision, a place of prayer and mercy and law and silence and passion – holy ground, the place of God’s presence.

To what place have we come? Ascending this path together in our worship, listening as the words of scripture are spoken, we know this place by many names: Moriah and Sinai, Horeb and Golgotha. Reaching in worship to grasp the Word as it descends into our outstretched hands, to take that Word to our hearts, to the mind, the spirit open to that presence, we find ourselves now – as though waking from sleep, startled and perhaps even a little afraid – in a place we call, simply……heaven: timeless, changeless; one day brilliantly revealed in bright sunlight, veiled in clouds the next; a place of power, of storms and fire, a place of safety and refuge, a place of beauty, of vision, of prayer and mercy and law and silence and passion…holy ground.

Listen to the words. Luke speaks. “About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

To what place have we come? To a place of light! Light! Dazzling whiteness! Brilliant, radiant light!

(Well, pity our poor, spectacle-soaked sensibilities! “His clothes became dazzling white!” Grasping the Word in our worship, we have climbed; we have ascended this mountain, we have been raised up to this place, this holy ground, this place of God’s presence, and what have we dragged along with us? Come on now. Be honest. Be pitiless in this. Even if we can wrestle aside the image of 1950’s-vintage happy homemaker joyfully lifting her miraculously stain-free, Tide-washed duds from the washer – these days we seem to care more about how the laundry smells than how it looks – the “dazzling white” still sends our minds reeling off in the direction of some new preparation for our teeth…Little wonder, with this load, we find it hard to climb, to ascend, to see…)

Set it aside! Leave it behind! This is holy ground. There is great wisdom in the ancient way of worshippers taking the shoes from their feet and leaving them at the door of the temple, the church, the mosque. We come this way as we came into the world – shoeless, with the hide of no dead thing intruding between ourselves and the ground which gives life.

To what place have we come? To a place of light! Light which from the first day of creation drove back the darkness. Light which with the dawn signals a new beginning, another chance, a fresh start. Light which with the dawn reveals, brings into sight pitilessly yet mercifully the failings and compromises and flaws and mistakes and bad choices and tragedies of the darkness now past. Light which is life and sight and safety and truth and understanding and joy and communion. Light which in the menorah of the temple, like the candles of our altar, speaks God’s presence, God’s glory. Gracious light, revealed now in the face of Jesus Christ.

Here are the words. They are words of worship. Let them lift you up. Take hold of them. Grasp them in your hands. Take the Word in these words of worship to your heart, your
“About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”

The appearance of his face changed, was transfigured, became radiant with light – and in that light, we see light; the light of heaven, the light of God’s mercy.

I have spoken here before of the Christian life as a struggle with confusion and lies and blindness and pride and ill will and jealousy and violence and hopelessness – I have spoken of our life together as a common struggle, an assault on the gates of hell. The Christian life is all that.

But the Christian life is this as well: an ascent, an entry into light, an encounter with mercy. Mercy is a word, signifying a forbearance from punishing, an exercise in compassion. The words of our worship today lead us deeper and higher, summon us, take us by the hand and raise us up beyond definitions to silence, to holy ground, where God is, where the face of Jesus Christ, changed now, transfigured, shines in radiant compassion, in glory, in mercy, and so finally, gives us His peace.

Here is mercy; here is heaven: the Word of the Lord, the radiant compassion of Jesus, the Christ, who summons us in worship to listen, to grasp, to ascend, to share in His light, to share that light, that mercy, with the world.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.